

# THRILLING DETECTIVE

10¢

MAR.

A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

EDITOR

## *Murder* IN THE *Sky*

A Johnny Wells  
Mystery Novel

By G. WAYMAN JONES

THE DEAD REACH FAR

An Exciting Novelet  
PRAGUE HALL



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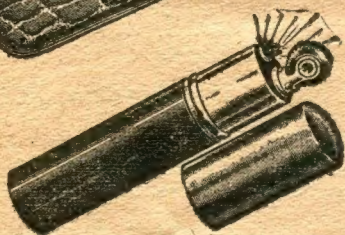
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# THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LIV, No. 3

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

March, 1945



**A Complete Mystery Novel**

## MURDER IN THE SKY

**By G. WAYMAN JONES**

*Cameraman-Detective Johnny Wells goes on the trail of a diabolically clever killer who builds a foolproof crime machine!*

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**An Exciting Novelet**

**THE DEAD REACH FAR** . . . . . **R. Sprague Hall** 36

*Through the fog, eerie and fearsome shadows stalk the old Goady farmhouse—bringing grim danger and doom!*

**Five Thrilling Short Stories**

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*Where readers, writers and the editor meet*

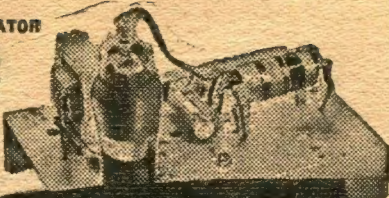
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# HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



**T**HOSE big green lights are beckoning again, friends, so let's walk through that impressive granite archway to the massive doors with the ground-glass panels. Once again let's turn the big, bronze knob and walk boldly into HEADQUARTERS. What's on the docket for next issue?

Does it seem a long time since we've had a Johnny Castle novelet in **THRILLING DETECTIVE** magazine? Last August we gave you "Slight Touch of Satan," and now, Johnny Castle "fans"—sit up and take notice! Author C. S. Montanye has a treat in store for you in **IT COMES UP MURDER**, a complete novelet in the next issue. If you aren't a Johnny Castle devotee, we're sure you will be after you read this one!

## The Missing Heel

No one knows a certain aspect of Broadway better than Johnny, especially Mike Cardigan's tavern and gambling house. Johnny has an appointment with Big Mike for midnight one evening. Bert Larn is there, his nose in a Racing Form. Johnny also notices a slick chick named Dixie Westrope who was one of the principal attractions of the musical, "All for the Girls," playing at the theatre next door. Dixie reportedly is engaged to one Bruce Pelton—one of those Broadway-Park Avenue affairs.

What interests Johnny about Dixie this evening is that the heel of one of her shoes is missing. When Big Mike fails to show up, Johnny goes up to the tavern keeper's private office. Mike is there all right, seated in his swivel-chair. There is a nasty bullet-hole in the middle of his forehead. On the floor is a gold pencil and the lift from a lady's dainty shoe.

Enters now Captain Fred Mullin of Homicide, with whom Johnny has crossed swords before. Castle fans will remember that Johnny and the captain don't like each other a bit. When Mullin lets Johnny leave the scene of the crime, Johnny bumps into a boy bearing a funeral wreath from Treppinger the florist. Said wreath is for Mike Cardigan—and the body isn't even cold! Who could have thought of anything so macabre?

When Johnny turns over the gold pencil to the cops, it pins the killing on Bert Larn. Johnny says nothing about the heel of the shoe. Johnny has sworn to have nothing to do with the solving of the crime.

Imagine his surprise therefore, on entering his own flat that night, to find an underworld character named Howe Stahl waiting for him, brandishing a business-like gat.

Stahl tells Johnny that Larn, the owner of the pencil, didn't kill Big Mike. Furthermore, it is to be Johnny's job to alibi Stahl—or else. The "else" means a freshly-dug grave for Johnny, right near Cardigan's if he wants it that way. Johnny is also to be shadowed every minute of the day. Talk about a tight spot!

## A Tough Trail

So Johnny finds himself working on the case, very much against his will. He calls on Dixie Westrope and you'll be surprised when you learn her relationship to Big Mike. He calls on Treppinger, only to find Captain Mullin has blocked his every move. Incidentally, as Johnny comes down the steps from the florist's home, somebody takes a pot shot at him. It is close, too!

With the cops urging him one way, while Stahl and the ever-present shadow pull him

(Continued on page 78)







# Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

 <b>5 inches of new Muscle</b> <i>"My arms increased 1 1/2", chest 2 1/2", forearm 7/8".—C. S. W. Va.</i>	 <b>What a difference!</b> <i>"I have put 3 1/2" on chest normal and 2 1/2" expanded."—F. E. N. Y.</i>
 <b>Here's what ATLAS did for ME!</b> <b>John Jacobs BEFORE</b> <b>John Jacobs AFTER</b>	 <b>For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS</b> <i>"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. Y.</i>   <b>GAINED 29 POUNDS</b> <i>"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170."—T. R., N. Y.</i>

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## A MYSTERY NOVEL



The room was flooded with light, and Val stood in the doorway, a heavy auto wrench in her hand

# MURDER IN THE SKY

By G. WAYMAN JONES

*Cameraman-Detective Johnny Wells goes on the trail of a diabolically clever killer who builds a foolproof crime machine!*

### CHAPTER I

#### LIVE AMMUNITION

THE town of Shelton dozed in the afternoon sun. It was a community of about fifteen thousand souls, not far from the Atlantic Ocean. There was the usual row of small town stores and a "Professional Building" for dentists, doctors, lawyers and architects. A policeman or two might be seen during the day, and by night four coupés patrolled the area. But crime never had seemed to find Shelton.

It had always been a quiet place, but now there was an anti-aircraft unit just outside of town with enough artillery to rock the town when it started throwing heavy stuff.

This day the encampment guards were out to keep the townspeople away. They carried rifles and meant business. In the combination living quarters and office of Colonel Dawson were several offices and an alert woman who was tall, slim and prematurely gray. She commanded the respect of every officer with whom she was consulting.

"The idea, Miss Heath," Colonel Dawson



was explaining, "is for you to go up in one of our planes and turn a camera on the battery. We'll start shooting. Your job is to see if the camera can locate the batteries while they are firing."

Lila Heath nodded. "If you can cover those guns when they are in action, you certainly have a type of camouflage that will help win this war."

Colonel Dawson smiled. "I don't believe your cameras will pick up any sign of the guns, Miss Heath. My boys and I have been waiting for action for months, but hoping we shall never have to fire at an enemy plane. But waiting gets monotonous, so we cooked up this new camouflage, and we're anxious to have the best known camera artist see if a film can pick up what the human eye can't."

"If you want this passed upon by an expert with a lens," Lila Heath said, "you should have called in Johnny Wells. Right now no one can manipulate a camera better than that boy."

"I've heard of him," the Colonel agreed, "but you're not exactly unknown in the realm of lenses and shutters, Miss Heath. Well, if we're all set—"

Lila Heath shrugged. "I've looked over the cameras in the plane. My assistant has put my gear aboard, so what's keeping us?"

COLONEL Dawson walked with her toward the plane. A two-man crew stood ready. Lounging near the plane was a brute of a man with a misshapen face and long arms ending in immense hands.

"That assistant of yours," the Colonel said, "strikes me as an odd sort."

Lila Heath laughed. "That's Pincher Moran. I picked him up when I was photographing a prison. He was ready to go out on parole, but he couldn't arrange a job."

"So you furnished the job," Colonel Dawson said. "He looks like the hunchback of Notre Dame without the hunch."

Lila Heath smiled with amusement. "Pincher was sent up because he always pinched his victims around the throat with his left hand while his right went through their pockets. He met his Waterloo when a Headquarters detective was ungentlemanly enough to draw a gun. However, Pincher has proved faithful to me, and I've grown to like him."

As they approached, "Pincher" Moran removed his cap and bobbed his head, while to his ugly face came an almost cherubic smile. Pincher's eyes were his outstanding feature. They were mildly blue and had death in them.

"Everything is aboard, ma'am," Pincher said to Lila Heath. "You gotta wear one of

them chutes. I ain't lettin' you get on until you got one, see?"

"He means that, Colonel," Lila said. "I'd better put one on."

In fifteen minutes, the plane took off as neatly as a bird. It gained altitude fast and finally disappeared in the clouds. Colonel Dawson glanced at his watch.

"Miss Heath will begin flying over the batteries in precisely fifteen minutes," he told a captain. "Order the gun crews to stand by."

The captain picked up a field telephone and gave the command. Soldiers sped to their guns and manned them.

Blank ammunition was being used. The guns would belch fire and smoke just as though they carried live shells, but their flashes were supposed to be concealed by the new camouflage. If Lila Heath's cameras failed to pick up any trace of the shooting, Colonel Dawson had something.

The Colonel had his eyes on his watch.

"Prepare to open fire," he said quietly and the command was relayed to all batteries.

A moment later, they saw the plane racing along on a perfect level. Lila Heath would be aiming her cameras now.

Colonel Dawson brought his hand down, and the ground quivered as the big guns opened up. Tree branches swayed from the concussion. Yet on the ground, no trace of those guns could be seen as they blazed away.

The photography plane made one run, circled and came back. The guns blasted again. Suddenly the plane was enveloped in a cloud of white smoke. Pieces of wing broke through that cloud and fluttered toward the earth. Then the smoke cloud became a plummeting ball of solid flame!

Sirens howled, and a crash wagon raced around, its driver trying to estimate where the blazing plane would fall. Colonel Dawson's face was white. The features of Pincher Moran had turned a violent purple. Great muscles stood out as he clenched both hands.

"Poor devils!" groaned Colonel Dawson. "And we can't help them! Give the order to cease firing."

The Captain gave it and dropped the phone back in place.

"But what on earth—" he began.

"That plane," the Colonel said between his teeth, "was struck by a shell. One of the batteries got live ammunition mixed up with the blanks."

He stopped short, watching the blazing plane disappear behind the fringe of trees. Distantly, they heard it crash, then the emergency truck was rolling in that direction.

"I want every gunnery sergeant to report to me," Colonel Dawson snapped out. "Send men to guard all ammunition piles. Crews



A rat scooted from the circle  
cast by Johnny's flashlight





will remain at their guns just as they are now. See to it, Captain."

**P**INCHER MORAN was walking slowly toward the Colonel, and Pincher's face was not pleasant to look upon.

"She's dead, ain't she?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so," the Colonel answered.

"Everyone aboard that plane must be dead."

"How'd it happen?" Pincher asked stoically.

"I don't know exactly." The Colonel hesitated. "I'd say, offhand, that one of the guns fired a live shell by mistake."

"Yeah," Pincher said. Then his blue eyes blazed. "You don't happen to have anybody named Roy Portis workin' on any of them guns, have you?"

"No, Pincher," the Colonel said. "We haven't a man of that name in the whole detail. There aren't so many men I can't remember their names. What made you ask that, Pincher?"

"Nothin'." Pincher hunched his massive shoulders, turned and walked slowly away.

Colonel Dawson watched him and frowned. But Pincher was just an odd person, who appreciated what Lila Heath had done for him. His question probably had no meaning.

Now there was much work to do. Dawson meant to find the gun crew which had slipped a live shell into the breach of its gun!

Almost an hour later, a young lieutenant reported at Dawson's headquarters.

"We located the wreckage, sir. There isn't much left."

Dawson sighed. "I know. Thank you, lieutenant."

## CHAPTER II

### BLIND ALLEY



**N**OT long after Lila Heath came to this ghastly end, Johnny Wells pulled his coupé up in front of a smart night-club. He was a husky young man with crew-cut brown hair and an indolent, easy-going air that masked the explosive determination buried beneath.

Beside him was lovely Valerie Grey, crack reporter on one of the big dailies. She looked utterly bored.

"Johnny," she sighed, "when are you going to stop looking for this needle in a haystack? Alonzo Gregg disappeared thirteen months ago. If all the cops in town, the F.B.I., and every private detective agency money can hire haven't found a trace of him, what makes you think you can do it?"

"I'm stubborn," he told her. "I can't help it, sweet, but when I do find Alonzo Gregg,

who'll try to beat me to a telephone for a scoop? Not the girl who is sitting beside me. Not much! This is a story, a big one. I want to break it, because Gregg was an important man."

"All right, Johnny. Go ahead, and I'll wait here. What's this Club Eloise? It looks expensive."

"That, Val, is the most expensive nightclub ever built. The checks there sometimes run into the thousands."

Val swung slim legs out of the car.

"I'll have a look," she said.

"You'll stay right where you are," Johnny told her firmly. "The place is a dump. Upstairs they have a gambling lay-out that's a honey. I dug up the fact that Alonzo Gregg was supposed to have visited the joint the night he disappeared. Also, I know the mug who owns the dive. Maybe he'll talk, but not if you're along. His mind won't be on Gregg."

Johnny hurried across the sidewalk, his leather-encased camera swinging to match his gait. Johnny was as apt to be without his camera as a policeman on duty would be without his gun and badge.

Valerie Grey watched him, and smiled. She admired Johnny's nerve. He was afraid of nothing and, more often than not, certain huskies found that his fists packed a surprising wallop, for he had spent some time in the ring.

Val thought back to Johnny's first appearance at the newspaper office where she worked. He had been looking for a job, and his sole asset had been one rather battered camera.

Val had taken him in hand then, had taught him the fundamentals of newspaper reporting, and watched him develop into a crack news photographer. He had transferred to a nation-wide syndicate which now gave him practically free rein on assignments, but he always turned in pictures of news interest.

He was fascinated by crime and criminals, and much of his work turned in that direction. He was known by the police all over the nation and worked hand in hand with them. Crooks had learned to trust him too—when he wasn't on their trail. If he secured information, he kept the source of it secret.

He and Val had fallen in love and frequently dreamed of the time when they would stop this business and settle down to a sedate life. Until then, however, each knew that marriage had no part in their careers.

Johnny, after passing through the revolving doors, found himself inside the velvet-and-satin-draped lobby of the club. Nobody was around. He walked across the dance floor toward the elaborate bar.

Beside the bar was a curtained doorway,



which he went through. This took him into a dimly lighted passageway, at the end of which was a glass door marked "PULL." He gave the door handle a tug, but the sign lied. The door had to be pushed.

Johnny wondered about it briefly, then suddenly found himself faced by three men who stepped from a doorway. They were smooth-looking customers, but he knew they carried guns and would use them if necessary.

"Where's Al Fiske?" Johnny asked blandly.

"Who wants to know?" one of the men countered.

"I'm Johnny Wells. Al knows me."

They all studied the reporter intently. Then the spokesman smiled.

"Okay, boys, this is Wells. Al says he's welcome any time. Al's upstairs, Wells. Ever been on the upper floors?"

"I lost my shirt there—twice," Johnny chuckled. "Lead on, MacDuff."

THEY stopped before an imposing door. Johnny's escort tapped on it in what apparently was a signal. The door, operated by an electrical mechanism, swung open. Behind a huge desk sat a thin-faced, dark-skinned man. He wore a two-hundred-dollar suit and sported a huge diamond ring. He arose and extended his hand.

"Well, well, if it isn't Johnny Wells! Come to take my picture, Johnny?"

"I'll do that some night when the cops get you," Johnny laughed and sat down. "Al, I want to ask you a question. A few months ago, on the night Alonzo Gregg disappeared, I know he came here first. Do you know what happened?"

Al Fiske calmly applied a lighter flame to the tip of his panatella. His eyes were steady, but a trifle cold.

"Alonzo Gregg?" he grunted. "The big-shot financier? Sure he was here that night. He showed up maybe four or five times a year. Good customer. Nice fellow."

"Too nice to have simply vanished," Johnny added. "Something happened to him, and I'm trying to find out what. Anything unusual happen the night he was here?"

"Not that I know of. He won a few hundred dollars and left shortly after midnight. Wasn't he ever seen after he left my club, Johnny?"

"Only once—when he was seen getting into a cab out front, and heard giving orders to be driven to his hotel. The driver says he did drive him there, but nobody saw him enter the hotel."

Fiske puffed slowly on the cigar. "What makes you think his coming here had anything to do with his disappearance, Johnny?"

"Nothing," Johnny sighed. "I'm just trying

to trace his movements. Thanks, Al. See you around."

Outside, as Johnny walked to his car, somewhere down the street, from a radio store, a radio in the doorway played loudly enough to grate on a man's nerves. Johnny scowled and got into the car beside Val.

"Doggone it, Val," he said, "how can a man vanish like that? An important and well-known man like Gregg? And why? There's a whale of a yarn behind his disappearance, and I'm going to get it—some day." He stopped short and held up a hand. "Listen, Val!"

Johnny's features were slowly undergoing a change, to show deep sorrow. That loud radio was turned to a news broadcast. The announcer was saying:

"A tragic accident occurred at an anti-aircraft battery unit in Shelton. Miss Lila Heath, famous photographer, was killed, with a two-man crew, when she flew above the gun emplacements to photograph certain secret tests. The guns were firing blank shells, but somehow a live shell was fired and it made a direct hit. Miss Heath is well known for her pictures, which have appeared in every newspaper and magazine in the country. She specialized in pictures of tombstones with strange epitaphs—"

Johnny didn't hear the rest of it.

"Lila—dead!" he said softly. "Val, she was swell!"

Val nodded. "I know, Johnny. She was my friend too. What a way to die—hit by a shell while flying over peaceful countryside!"

Johnny stepped on the starter.

"I'm going to that encampment, Val. If you want to come along, I'll drop you while I pack, and pick you up later. . . . Val, sometimes coincidence stretches itself a little too far. When a trained gun crew slips a live shell instead of a blank into a gun, I get suspicious. I want to check up on it."

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," Val said.

She, too, sensed a story. As Johnny said, it was asking a lot of coincidence.

Engrossed in the tragedy, neither Johnny nor Val heeded what went on around them. Neither saw a man emerge from the alley beside Al Fiske's night-club, dismiss a taxi that stood nearby, then saunter up behind Johnny's coupé, close enough to hear what Johnny and Val were saying.

As the coupé pulled away, he disappeared down the alley in a hurry. . . .

IT WAS dark as Johnny and Val drove toward Shelton. Finally they passed a large white signpost which pointed toward a dirt road and indicated an Army encampment in that direction.

Johnny had to drive slowly. The road took unexpected turns. It was narrow, deeply



rutted from the passage of heavy material, and hemmed in by towering trees.

Suddenly he heard a shout from somewhere behind. Automatically he put on the brakes. There was the crack of a rifle and the impact of a bullet against the back of the coupé. Johnny let out a yell as Val slid as far down in the seat as possible. He shut off the motor and opened the car door.

"Halt!" he heard.

"I'm halted," Johnny yelled back, and his reply was another bullet.

It hit the rear of the car again, too low to injure passengers. Johnny reached for a flashlight and pointed its beam back along the road. It revealed a man in Army uniform with a rifle butt snuggled close to one cheek as he sighted along the barrel.

"Hey—don't shoot!" Johnny yelled. "We're stopped!"

But the man was going to shoot. Johnny wasn't certain whether or not he had passed onto prohibited Army territory, but he hadn't noticed any signs warning people away. But a bullet is no respecter of mistakes.

He hurled the flashlight at the soldier—a blind throw, for as soon as the beam left the man, he was shrouded by darkness. But accurate or not, the soldier didn't shoot.

Johnny popped back into the coupé, stepped on the starter and whisked the car as rapidly down the road as possible. There was one more shot. It snarled dangerously close to Johnny's head and shattered the windshield.

Johnny, jaws set, kept on going. He was raging. That soldier may have been following orders, but he was doing so stupidly. Johnny now had two bones to pick with the commandant of the encampment.

"Can I come up for air now?" Val asked from the floor. "And would you mind telling us what we did to get shot at like that?"

"I'm going to find out," Johnny said grimly.

Nothing further happened until they reached a huge gate with four M.P.'s guarding it.

"I'm a newspaperman," Johnny told the sergeant. "I want to see the officer in command."

"Sorry, sir," the sergeant responded. "Colonel Dawson gave orders that nobody is to be admitted. Without a doggone good reason, anyway."

"Well, you tell Colonel Dawson I've got a heck of a good reason," Johnny said tightly. "Five minutes ago, one of your sentries opened fire on us. If he called out for us to halt, we didn't hear him. We stopped when the first bullet hit my car, but that dope hit the car two more times."

The sergeant walked over to the car and studied the bullet-holes.

"But I don't get it, sir," he grunted. "We have no sentries posted back up the road and if we had, they wouldn't try to hit the car. If you stopped, any soldier would hold his fire. I'll telephone the Colonel."

In a short time, an M.P. hopped on the running board and directed Johnny to Colonel Dawson's headquarters. The Colonel shook hands with him, then examined the bullet-holes.

"I don't understand it," he said. "Come into my office, Mr. Wells. Bring your friend too."

## CHAPTER III

### HOUSE OF MYSTERY



INSIDE his office, Colonel Dawson helped Valerie into a chair, then Johnny told him what had happened. The Colonel shook his head.

"I can account for every one of my men tonight," he said. "After what happened today, I confined every man to the camp."

Therefore, the man shooting at you was either an impostor or some crazy soldier gone over the hill with his rifle. The latter is hardly likely, Mr. Wells."

"Let's forget it," said Johnny. "Colonel, I was a friend of Lila Heath's. I came here to see if I could help. Have you established the fact that a live shell was accidentally fired?"

"We have not," Colonel Dawson snapped. "In fact, we established that a live shell was not fired. I don't know what happened. My men did find shell fragments inside the plane, so it must have been a shell, but where one came from, I don't know. Tomorrow, we shall further examine the wreckage which has been brought here."

Johnny prevailed upon the Colonel to let him see the wreckage and got permission to photograph the twisted, blackened mass of metal—not for publication, but to help determine facts. He took a number of flashlight shots, most of them with a close-up lens, and concentrated upon the spots where shell fragments had ripped through the metal.

"Maybe they will show something," he told Colonel Dawson. "I'll be back in the morning."

The Colonel wrote him a pass for two, smiling at Val.

"I've sent a detail to scour the woods around the spot where you were shot at," he said. "Seems odd that should happen so close on the heels of the accident this afternoon."

"Wish I'd got a look at that soldier's face," Johnny said. "The rifle butt hid it."

"By the way"—Colonel Dawson frowned—



"Miss Heath had a Man Friday with her. A huge brute named Pincher Moran. He saw the plane burst into flame and it affected him rather badly. Later he asked me if I had a man named Roy Portis under my command, and the question seemed strange. I have no such person."

"I know Pincher," Val broke in. "Lila took on plenty when she helped him get out of prison. If she'd been found strangled we'd know where to look for her murderer."

Johnny drove to town and visited the police station where he learned that no civil investigation of the accident was under way. He discovered that Lila Heath had rented a bungalow in town, as if she had expected to spend considerable time in these parts.

As Johnny drove toward the bungalow, Val seemed worried.

"I'm beginning to think we've stumbled on something," she said. "If whoever fired at us wasn't a sentry, then it was an attempt at murder."

Johnny shuddered.

"And a close one too. Val, I can't figure it out. Unless Lila Heath was murdered somehow and the killer doesn't want us making an investigation. But how could he know we were on our way? How did he recognize the car? Maybe there'll be some answers in Lila's bungalow."

They found it, an isolated, spacious bungalow, a quarter of a mile back from the road. As they climbed the steps, they saw that the front door was wide open. Johnny whispered to Val to wait, and crept gingerly into the darkened house.

He tensed. The floor had given a faint squeak somewhere to his left. He struck a match and held it up long enough to see a man charging toward him.

Johnny flipped the match away, stepped aside and felt the attacker go fumbling past. Then he launched an attack of his own. In the inky darkness they began to fight it out, Johnny punching away with short, painful blows calculated to weaken the other man. In return, Johnny took a couple of hard pokes to the face.

Then, all of a sudden, the room was flooded with light and Val stood in the doorway. A heavy auto wrench was in her hand. Johnny wound both arms around the struggling man and held him. Val poked the handle of the wrench against the fellow's back.

"Drop your hands," she ordered crisply, "or I'll shoot!"

The man stopped fighting and his arms shot toward the ceiling. He was a thinnish man of about forty, narrow-faced, with little eyes set too close together, and thin lips.

"Okay, Val," Johnny said. "I can handle this monkey now. What's the idea, my friend?"



"I'm ready," Johnny said and reached for the light



"What's the idea?" the man asked, puzzled. "I should ask that. You just broke into my house. I had a right to defend myself and my property."

"Do you mean you rented this place to Lila Heath?" Johnny asked.

"Sure I did. I'm Miles Hudkin, and this is my house. Who are you?"

**T**HIS man probably was just what he represented himself to be, Johnny thought, but the way he had attacked indicated that he either was afraid of something, or had been trapped in the act of committing a crime.

"My name is Wells," Johnny said. "I was a good friend of Lila Heath's. This was her house, and as to your right to be here, under the circumstances, I'll challenge that. Beat it, Mr. Hudkin."

Miles Hudkin scowled, but he knew the savage power of Johnny's fists, and decided to withdraw. He picked up his hat, glared, then bolted for the door. Johnny closed and locked it.

"To keep out mosquitos and other pests." He grinned at Val. "I wonder what Hudkin wanted. Come on, we'll do a little checking."

In a short time they located Lila Heath's dark room. It was well equipped. Apparently Lila had been enlarging some pictures before she went to the airfield, for the developing trays were full, and some liquid had slopped onto the bench along one side of the wall.

Johnny saw a candid camera in this liquid and he frowned. The lens of the camera was naked, its aluminum cover on the floor. The lens was pushed up against a wad of dirty cheese-cloth. Johnny bent over the camera. The back plate was not closed tightly.

"Val," he said softly, "take a look at this. Lila would no more have put an expensive Leica in a pool of water than a surgeon would his scalpels or an engineer his micrometer. The lens is pushed against a lot of linty rags—another thing Lila wouldn't do. The back isn't quite closed either. I'm beginning to feel sure Lila was murdered."

Taking advantage of the splendidly equipped dark room, Johnny went to work. He turned on a safety lamp and removed the film from Lila Heath's camera. He developed it deftly and held the finished product up to a white light.

"Just shots of houses and some pastoral scenes," he grunted. "Lila snapped everything she laid her eyes on. She didn't come across a cemetery, though. If she had, believe me, there'd have been pics of tombstones on this film."

"Tombstones?" Val asked incredulously.

"Uh-huh." Johnny had the room darkened again and was developing the film from his own camera. "Lila made a hobby of tomb-

stones, the old ones with odd inscriptions on them."

Val helped Johnny dry the prints. He blew them up, developed and fixed the prints, put them on an electric dryer, and then lit cigarettes for two.

"Johnny," Val said, "do you really think Lila was murdered?"

"I don't know," Johnny said slowly. "I can't see how anyone could gain access to a spare ack-ack gun and have the training to draw a bead on Lila's plane and shoot it down with one shell. The whole battery couldn't have been in on the deal, and a single soldier couldn't pull a stunt of that kind. The shells are passed from hand to hand among several soldiers. . . . Let's see what the blow-ups look like."

He took the prints off the dryer and placed them under a white light. They showed up the wreckage in detail. Johnny indicated the hollow shell which had once been the cabin of the plane.

"Boy, did we find something!" he murmured. "See how those steel and aluminum bands bend outward? Unless the shell penetrated the plane before it exploded, whatever blew the plane to bits was inside the cabin!"

"Was it some kind of a bomb?"

"Maybe." Johnny's eyes narrowed. "Lila was probably murdered, and someone knew we were coming and didn't want us to investigate the case. With Lila murdered, we have to look for a motive, and there are enough clues to give us a vague idea."

"You mean the camera?" Val queried.

"Yes. Someone removed the film, replaced it with another and took a few shots at random. Poor shots too. Then that someone put the camera on the bench where we found it."

"Lila must have taken a picture of something mighty important," Val said softly. "The killer got away with the film, Johnny, and that puts us way back in the running."

**H**E CRUSHED out his cigarette.

"Maybe." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "We photographers are a strange breed, Val. Just making a picture is only half the game. Lila lived for her pictures, and every shot she took meant something. She kept a diary in which she listed each shot, indicating the light meter reading, the kind of film, the time of day, the lens opening and the shutter speed. Our job is to locate that diary."

"I'll start on the rooms in back of the house," Val suggested. "Call out to me every few minutes, will you, darling? This house gives me the creeps."

They separated and began the hunt. Now and then, Johnny called out to Val and received a quick answer.



He spotted a small leather utility case hanging from the back of a straight chair, pounced on it and opened the case. In it was Lila Heath's emergency equipment of extra films, lenses, filters—and a leather-bound book.

"I've got it!" he called triumphantly. "Hey, Val—I found it!"

"Then put it back!" a hoarse voice commanded.

Johnny spun around. The man who was coming toward him was Pincher, and his face was dark with rage.

"That's Miss Heath's stuff," Pincher growled. "You ain't got no right to take it. Put that book back, or I'll wring your neck!"

"Hold everything!"

Johnny was sweating. If this hulk ever got a grip on his throat, he would be closer to death than when the strange soldier had opened fire on him.

"Put that book back," Pincher repeated ominously.

"Pincher Moran," Johnny said. "I know you worked for Lila and thought as much of her as I did. I'm Johnny Wells. You must have heard her speak of me. I came here to help."

Pincher seemed to relax.

"Yeah, yeah, you're Wells. Miss Heath pointed you out once. You and her was good friends. Put the book back, you hear me?"

"Pincher," Johnny argued, "this book may help us find out who murdered Lila."

"Murdered her?" Pincher roared the words so loud the old house seemed to rattle. "Who did it? Tell me, so I can fix him good! Come on—who was it?"

"I don't know," Johnny answered. "Not yet, Pincher. You can help me find who did it, but stop threatening me."

"Okay," Pincher relaxed entirely. "You show me what to do, only make it fast. It was Roy Portis, wasn't it?"

"Roy Portis?" Johnny asked. "Who is he?"

"Lila's husband. They was married last year, and he's a heel. I shoulda busted his neck long ago. Portis killed her. He always wanted money, and she wouldn't give him any."

"Lila married?" Johnny whistled in amazement. "I never knew that."

"Nobody did, because she didn't want it known," Pincher grumbled. "That Portis ain't fit to breathe. If she was bumped, he did it."

Suddenly Johnny thought about Val. She should have heard the commotion, but she hadn't put in an appearance. Johnny raced to the rear of the house. The back door was open and, on the floor near the pantry, lay Val's purse. Clearly she had been taken away by force and with such surprise that she hadn't been able to call out. And Pincher Moran had arrived just in time to occupy Johnny's

attention while Val was being snatched!

He sped out into the night, listening for sounds of a struggle. He heard nothing. The silence was complete. Night insects should have been chirping, but they were silent. Someone's passing had frightened them.

## CHAPTER IV

### PICTURE IN THE DARK



JOHNNY WELLS kept looking until he was exhausted. Then he returned to the house. Now, with Val in peril, he *had* to get a lead on the killer before he added her to his list of victims.

Pincher swore loudly that he had nothing to do with it. He promised to help in every way.

Johnny showed him Lila Heath's photographic diary.

"Yeah"—Pincher nodded heavily—"she always carried it. She did today too when we went to take some pictures in a cemetery, some more of a windmill, and an old factory that used to grind wheat or somethin'."

No such pictures had been on the film in Lila's camera, nor were there any undeveloped prints around. Somewhere Lila had innocently stumbled on something and preserved it on film. Whatever it was had become the motivation for her murder.

"Look, Pincher," Johnny said. "You and I will work together to find the rat who killed Lila. I've an even more personal interest now, because my girl has been kidnaped. You stay here, and if anybody comes, snag him, no matter who it is. Then phone me. I'll be at the hotel. I understand there's only one in town."

"Okay," Pincher growled. "I hope somebody does come along. You didn't see Miss Heath burned to death like I did. You can't get as mad as I am."

"Can't I?" Johnny commented grimly. "If that killer shows up and you want some fun on your own, keep hoping I don't get him first."

Johnny returned to the car, worried sick because there wasn't the slightest clue to who had snatched Val. The diary might tell something, but that would take time. He would have to go back over Lila Heath's route and study each spot where she had taken a picture.

He left the car at the curb in front of the hotel, went in and asked for a room. He registered, and the clerk said:

"Oh yes, Mr. Wells. A message just came for you. I found it on the desk and didn't see who brought it."

Johnny was looking down at the register.

"Thanks. I was expecting a message. I see



someone I know is registered. Roy Portis. When did he check in?"

"Mr. Portis? Why, yesterday morning. He's not in now, though. Been out all night, in fact."

"One more question," Johnny said. "Who is Miles Hudkin, and what kind of a chap is he?"

"Miles?" The clerk laughed. "He's the worst crab in town, and he'd do just about anything if ten cents was involved. Runs one of the stores, but his business is bad. When he had the only store, he soaked everybody and people haven't forgotten."

Johnny ripped open the plain envelope bearing his name in crude block letters. As he expected, it was a message, inspired by the man who had kidnaped Val. It was a brief note in her handwriting.

Johnny took it up to his room, sat down and read it slowly. It said:

Johnny,

This is a warning that if you follow the route which Lila Heath took and listed in her diary, I will be killed. If you want me to live, you must call one of the bell-boys at the hotel, give him the diary and tell him he is to leave the book in Room 209 at one twenty-five in the morning. The room will be dark, and the boy is to place the book on the bureau and leave immediately.

If you make any attempt to turn this into a trap, I will be killed. It's up to you, darling. They let me say that much of what I want to say. I do not *infra* (excuse) infer that they won't keep their word. When you have surrendered the diary, you will receive further orders.

Johnny had no doubt that it had been written by Val. The word "*infra*," which she had pretended was a mistake in the spelling of "*infer*" intrigued him. "*Infra*" had a meaning for a photography addict.

He put the letter down. Whoever held Val a prisoner would certainly not hesitate to murder again. Whoever it was, knew that Johnny was on their trail and was making headway. He pondered the idea of giving up the diary. A glance at his watch told him he had about fifteen minutes in which to make up his mind.

Whoever was after that diary probably was in Room 209 already. He wasn't being given time enough either to memorize or copy the contents of the diary. But they seemed to have forgotten that Johnny Wells was a photographer.

**Q**UICKLY he propped the diary up against other books, brought a desk and a floor lamp over and turned their rays on it. Then swiftly he was photographing every page of the diary.

He had thirty-six frames on the film, used them all, and didn't dare take any additional

time, for there was much to be done.

His suitcase contained few clothes, but a large amount of photographic equipment. He removed the film from his camera, replaced it with one sensitive to *infra-red* light rays. Then, stuffing two *infra-red* bulbs under his coat, he went into the corridor.

He approached Room 209 and tapped sharply on the panels. There was no answer. He tried the door. It was locked. Johnny knew how to take care of a small matter like that. He had learned how to pick ordinary locks from experts. In one minute he had the door open, but the room was empty.

He made certain of that before he unscrewed the bulbs in the two lights in the room. In their place, he inserted the *infra-red* bulbs and tilted the lamp shades ceilingward. He turned on the juice, and the bulbs warmed feebly, but with the shades pointed up, the change could not be seen by anyone in the room.

This done, he hurried back to his own room and got ready for a ticklish act. Val's life depended upon the success of it!

Johnny called for a bell-boy. When he came, immediately, Johnny laid a ten-dollar bill on the table.

"I want to play a trick on a pal of mine," he said. "This is yours if you help me. Bring me a uniform exactly like yours, one that will fit me. Then let yourself in Room two-o-nine. Don't turn on any lights. Just wait, inside the door. Pretty soon I'll come in, wearing a uniform. When I give you a nudge, walk out just as if you were me, completing an errand. Understand?"

"Yeah, sure. But how do I know you're not a crook?"

Johnny quickly showed the bell-boy an honorary police captain's badge which he had earned long ago by helping solve a crime. It was the first time he had ever taken advantage of that shield, but he was glad to own it now.

"I'll trust you," he told the bell-boy. "This is police business. If you do as I say and keep your mouth shut, the ten dollars is yours. If you talk to anyone—well, is it a deal?"

It was. In short order Johnny was provided with a uniform. While he and the bell-boy didn't look much alike, they were about the same size.

When the lad left to take up his position in Room 209, Johnny took a make-up kit from his paraphernalia. He used it mainly for making up subjects for color photography. He was no master at the art of disguise, but he could blacken his hair by rubbing a powder into it and doctor his eyebrows with make-up crayon. Still he didn't intend for anyone to get a close look at him.

He donned the uniform, strapped his camera around his middle, and left his blouse open



so that the lens was unobstructed. Picking up the bell-boy's tray, he put the book on it and held the tray in such a position as to conceal his open blouse and the lens.

He waited impatiently until it was time, then raced along the corridor toward Room 209 and held his breath for fear some of the hotel staff might come along.

The bell-boy had provided a second key, so Johnny had only to insert the key and open the room door. He walked in, slid the book off the tray and handed the real bell-boy the empty tray. He gave him a nudge, and the bell-boy walked out, closing the door behind him.

Johnny made certain the infra-red bulbs were lit, then stepped into the clothes closet. He left the door open a crack, got the camera ready and waited.

Ten minutes dragged by before he heard a key scrape in the lock. The door opened for a flash, then was closed again. Johnny saw no light from the hallway and guessed the intruder had put out the hall lights.

Johnny aimed his camera at the table where he had placed the diary and opened the shutter. He took a half-second exposure, not daring a longer one as the man was on the move and might blur the picture.

The camera made only a faint click, then the room door was opened again. Johnny lingered in the closet for five minutes, then listened at the room door. Hearing no sound, he stepped out and made his way rapidly to his own room.

He had a picture of whoever had come for that diary. He also knew that Roy Portis, whom Pincher said was Lila Heath's husband, occupied Room 213, just four doors down the hall from the room where the diary had been delivered.

**J**OHNNY was certain that another message would soon come for him. He put the two films in his pocket, after he had changed to his own clothes, went down to the lobby and stepped over to the desk. A white envelope lay on it. His name was written in the same block letters.

"This seems to be mine," he said to the clerk, who nodded sleepily.

Johnny sat down and opened the envelope. It was another letter in Val's hand, and read:

Dear Johnny: If you get this letter, it means you have obeyed the orders in the first one, and I'll be alive. Now you must go back to New York, and make no report of my absence to anyone. They'll let me return when they get good and ready.

He left the hotel and sauntered down the silent street. Suddenly he stopped short and turned to look in the window of a store. He took the next corner sharply and pulled up.

After that he darted into the next alley, then he was sure no one followed him. The kidnapers probably figured if he accepted their terms with the diary, there was little to fear from him.

Hurrying to where he had left his car, he drove it straight to Lila Heath's bungalow, and almost had his neck broken by Pincher, who was outside the house to intercept any intruders.

"Nice work," Johnny said. "You're right on the job, Pincher. I'm going to use Lila's laboratory. You stay on watch."

The infra-red picture was the most important, and he developed that first. The tiny negative was none too clear, so he dried it and made a blow-up shot. He groaned dismally. He had obtained the picture in the darkness all right, without the man who had come for that diary having had the vaguest inkling of it, but the fellow had worn a gas mask!

There was no time to bemoan this. Val was still in danger and Johnny had a hope that in her first letter she had given him a clue. He held the letter up to a powerful light but it showed nothing. Anyhow, her captor would never have released a letter that showed signs of a trick. But the word "infra" held meaning for Johnny. He quickly set up infra-red lamps, used his camera again and photographed the letter with that invisible light.

Now he really held his breath. If this picture showed no better results than the one he had taken of the mystery man, he would be stumped. But even on the tiny negative he saw something. He dried it carefully, restraining an impulse to rush the job. He did cut one corner by projecting the image on a screen, using the enlarger as the projector.

The picture came out in reverse, but that was not important, because it still showed what Val had cleverly and secretly contrived to include with that letter. It was a drawing—not too good—but distinguishable—of an old-fashioned windmill with built-up sides like a huge steeple.

Apparently the drawing had been made with ink and then removed with an eradicator.

How had Val accomplished it?

Johnny went to the door and called Pincher in.

"Think hard now," he cautioned. "This is important to finding the man who killed Lila. You were with her while she took most of these pictures. You said she took one of an old windmill?"

"Yeah—it's down beside a brook about two miles north of here. Miss Heath took a lot of pictures of it. What's that got to do with finding the killer?"

"More than you think," Johnny said. "You stay right here. Don't try to follow me, what-



ever you do. There's another life hanging in the balance."

Johnny raced back to his car, but before he got it started he heard Pincher charging down the path, calling his name in a hoarse voice.

"I don't know what you're gonna do, pal," the huge Pincher said, when he reached the car, "but I thought you ought to know about that windmill. Miss Heath was going with a rich mug named Bert Bowman. I heard him ask her to marry him a couple of times, and she cried pretty hard. She couldn't marry anybody so long as that rat Portis was alive, or until she divorced him."

"Bert Bowman." Johnny tucked the name in his mental file. "Thanks, Pincher. Why did you connect him with the mill?"

"He owns it," Pincher replied.

Johnny grunted in surprise and sped away.

He saw the mill shortly, standing like a thick finger against the starlit skyline. Its vanes were battered and certainly not in working order. As he drew closer, he discovered that the place had a forlorn appearance, like some ghost out of the past. Johnny never carried a gun, but just then the feel of one would have been comforting.

## CHAPTER V

### MILL OF MYSTERY



**D**ESPITE the dilapidated appearance of the old mill, its door was stout, and equipped with a modern lock. Johnny was getting ready to try his luck with one of the two boarded-up windows when car headlights swept around the bend well down the road. He ducked out of sight.

The car was driven directly up to the mill and a brawny man got out. He drew keys from his pocket and walked purposefully toward the door. He had unlocked the door and started to open it when Johnny emerged from his hiding place. He wanted to look at this man although his suspicions were lulled somewhat by the manner in which the fellow had driven up to the place.

"Who the devil are you," the man asked, as Johnny walked toward him. "What are you doing here?"

"Maybe I might ask the same questions," Johnny said.

"You might, but you wouldn't get the same answers. I'm Albert Bowman. This is my property."

"So you're Bowman!" Johnny said. "My name is Johnny Wells."

"The photographer?" Bowman dropped his antagonism. "Lila told me all about you, and if you are here, it must be for a purpose."

"It is," Johnny replied. "How come you're at this old mill at such a time of night?"

"Suspicious, aren't you? Well, I went to Lila's bungalow a little while ago and almost had my head torn off by Pincher Moran. He told me you were in town, and that you would probably be around here. Knowing your reputation for clearing up mysteries, I wanted to see you. Another reason I'm here is because I've been told about mysterious light inside the mill."

"Suppose we take a look." Johnny pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Using a flashlight he noted one significant thing. While there was dust, it seemed to be spotty. The rafters, for instance, were thickly covered, but some of the old wooden machinery bore only a trace.

In the center of the mill were the two gigantic grinding stones. Old burlap bags were piled in one corner. A rat scooted from beside the pile of chaff that had been left there when the mill had been in use. But there was no sign of Val. She had wanted Johnny to come to the mill—that was certain—and he meant to stay until he found out why.

Bowman kicked an empty tin soup can.

"Not even rusted," he grunted. "Someone has been here all right."

Johnny examined several footprints on the cement floor. The left shoe seemed larger than the right and had been dragged along, leaving a scratchy mark between the prints.

"Find something?" Bowman queried.

"Footprints—may have been made by a tramp. Bowman, are there any nooks in this place where someone might hide? What's up in the tower?"

"So far as I know, not a thing. This mill hasn't been used in nearly fifteen years, but I don't want some tramp to burn it down. Want to look around?"

Johnny took his time about it. The footprints interested him, but he really searched for any clues from Val. She was either hidden somewhere in this mill or she had expected to be taken to it. His search was a vain one. All he got was the impression that the old mill had been used more than Bowman knew, or pretended to know.

Johnny was sick with worry over Val. And he realized he might have to obey the orders of the man who wore a gas mask and didn't hesitate at murder. But what the kidnaper's reasons were seemed as remote right now as Val's whereabouts.

"Wells!" Bowman called. "Come over here a moment, will you? I've found something peculiar."

Johnny hurried over to the great millstones. The flat one was attached to a long shaft which disappeared through the side of the mill, where there was a rather swift



stream. When the water turned the paddles, it furnished power enough to move this shaft and, in turn, the millstone. There was a second shaft running straight up into the tower.

Bowman pointed at the big flat stone, indicating a crack extending from the edge straight to the center.

"See that? The last time I was here, that crack was in another position. I know, because I had a chance to sell the stone, and I examined the crack in it carefully. That stone has been moved!"

JOHNNY seized the edge of the stone and gave it a tug. To his amazement it turned easily and seemed to be rotating along threads carved into the upright shaft. Bowman went to work also, and between them they rapidly turned the stone until it was raised a good two feet above the floor.

Johnny Wells turned the ray of his flash into a deep circular pit. At the bottom were boxes, neatly piled, and a ladder leaned against the sides of the hole.

"The old well!" Bowman exclaimed. "The upright shaft used to operate it. What the devil is all that stuff?" He waved a hand at the boxes.

"I don't know," Johnny said grimly, "but I intend to find out."

"I do too!" Bowman said. "Just a second!"

He hurried out to his car and returned with a heavy wrench.

"If we meet anybody down there," he said, "now I can give an account of myself."

They descended rapidly and stood staring at the boxes, piled high above their heads. They were cartons of food.

"Know what I think," Bowman said. "This is the cache of somebody who runs a neat little Black Market business."

Using his flashlight, Johnny made an inspection. On one rather large box he discovered tiny pieces of a bright red, brittle substance. Somehow it seemed familiar.

Covertly he tucked the bits of red stuff into his vest pocket.

"So a Black Market's behind it," he muttered. "But Bowman, there just doesn't seem to be enough stuff here to warrant multiple murder."

"I don't get it," Bowman frowned.

"I'm convinced Lila Heath was murdered."

Johnny said, "and not by an anti-aircraft shell either. Then Val—my friend—and I were shot at by a man dressed as a soldier. Finally Val was kidnaped. Does a small Black Market business seem to make all that necessary?"

"No," Bowman admitted. "Unless this is only one of many caches. Incidentally, there's just one man who could be running a Black Market here—Miles Hudkin. The only other two stores in Shelton are of the chain variety. Come to think of it, Hudkin was almost on the rocks before the war began. Now he seems to be doing quite well. What do you intend to do about this, Wells—with your friend probably a hostage?"

"I don't know," Johnny sighed. "Unless I get something real by morning, I'll probably do as I've been ordered to do, and go away. Above all, I don't want anything to happen to Val."

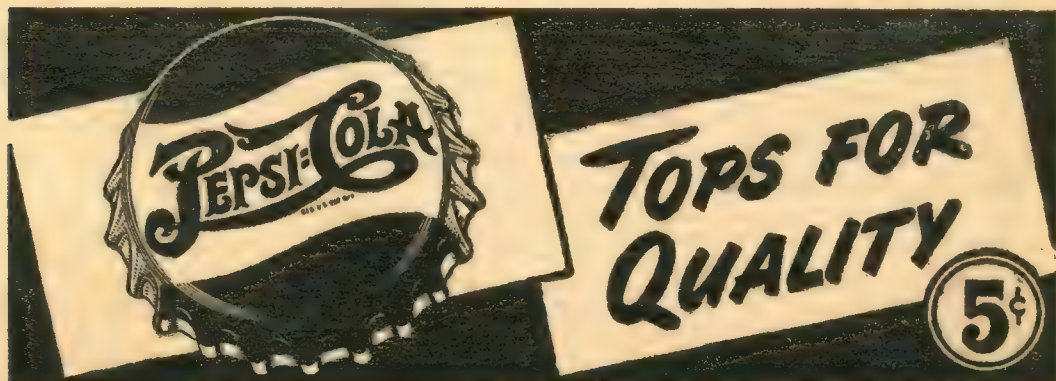
Bowman nodded. "I know. I felt that way about Lila. If she was murdered, I'll do everything possible to help you find the killer. If you are forced to leave, I'll carry on as best I can. Lila would rest easier if her murder was avenged."

Johnny was fussing with his camera, affixing a flash bulb into place. Suddenly he raised his camera and took a picture, with Bowman's head and shoulders in focus. Both men were nearly blinded by the flash.

"Sorry," he said. "I wanted to get a shot of this stuff; in case it's moved before we can clamp down on whoever owns it."

They climbed back to the old mill, replaced the big stone and went outside. John-

[Turn page]





ny got into his car. Bowman put a foot on the running board.

"Let me help," he urged. "I'll be at my factory. I make wooden novelties. You can always get in touch with me."

"Thanks." Johnny nodded. "I may have to call on you. It wouldn't take much to make me leave town pronto. I'm scared stiff about Val."

Johnny drove to town and stopped in front of the hotel, wondering if another mysterious note had arrived. There was none, but the clerk volunteered the information that Roy Portis was in his room now.

Johnny walked up the steps, adjusting his camera as he approached the door of the room occupied by Lila Heath's husband. The photographer had a new flash bulb screwed into place when Portis let him in.

**P**ORTIS was dark-featured and oily in appearance and manner. Lila, Johnny thought, must have gone berserk to marry this model for a patent-leather hair ad.

"I was a friend of your wife," Johnny introduced himself. "My name—"

"Is Johnny Wells," Portis said with a smirk. "Tell me something—did Lila leave any dough?"

Johnny's eyes narrowed. If this sticker made one more crack like that, Johnny determined to slug him.

Portis walked to a chair. His left leg dragged slightly. He wore a built-up shoe on his left foot, larger than the one on his right. Portis was the man who had been prowling inside the mill.

"Before we start talking," Johnny said, "do you mind if I take your picture? The newspapers will run it."

Portis grinned, went to the bureau slicked his hair down and adjusted his tie and lapels. He sat down and struck a pose.

Johnny took a shot of him, then he sat down on the bed.

"I'm not interested in how you met Lila nor why she married you, Portis," he said. "I don't care if she left a million and you get it all. All I want is the answer to one question. What were you doing around that old mill?"

Portis jumped as if someone had exploded a firecracker under his chair. He went white, but quickly regained his composure.

"You mean that ancient barn? I just looked the place over. I knew Lila had been taking a lot of pictures and . . . Don't kid me, Johnny Wells. Lila was knocked off. I'm trying to find the lug who murdered her."

Johnny shrugged. "I guess the only people who haven't figured Lila was murdered are the cops. Okay, I'll accept that explanation. I'll also tell you why I want to know. A girl, a particular friend of mine, is working with

me. She was snatched. I wondered if she could have been taken to that old mill and hidden. Did you see anyone?"

Portis shook his head quickly.

"Not me. I only stayed there a couple of minutes. Didn't like the place—too spooky."

Johnny knew that despite a wholesome dislike of this man, he had nothing on him. He asked a few more questions, then took his leave.

But he was not done for the night by any means, so long as Val was in danger. A plan was slowly taking shape in his mind. In all likelihood it would fail, but at least he would have saved her life.

He went to Miles Hudkin's general store. It was dark, but the skinflint lived in a room behind the store, so he banged on the door until Hudkin let him in, wearing a battered old bathrobe and long nightshirt.

"What do you want?" Hudkin glared at him. "First, you try to throw me out of my own house. Lila Heath rented it from me, but when she died, it became mine again. Now you wake me up at this ungodly hour."

"Let me in," Johnny said wearily. "I've found out how the grinding stone at the old mill works and what's underneath it. I figured you might like to know before I contacted the OPA."

Hudkin turned red and stepped aside. Johnny walked past him. Hudkin led him to shabby quarters behind the store.

"You haven't told anybody?" he asked nervously. "Look here—that stuff is some extra stock I had when the war broke out and I put it there for safe-keeping. In case we got bombed or something."

Johnny raised his camera and blinded Hudkin with the glare of the flash bulb.

"What was that for?" Hudkin yelled.

"I just wanted a picture of a liar," Johnny told him flatly. "Sit down. You may be able to save your neck by talking. A girl named Valerie Grey has been kidnaped. Someone is holding her to make me clear out of here. I think she was taken to the mill. Do you know anything about it?"

"A kidnaped girl?" Hudkin cried in horror. "No—not a thing! I'm not that crazy. By the way, would you be interested in a little offer of something to forget—"

"How much?" Johnny asked bluntly. If Hudkin offered a large sum, it would be clear that he was in this thing on a big scale.

Hudkin cleared his throat and squeaked an offer, as if his mercenary soul had a stranglehold on his voice.

"A—a hundred dollars?"

"I'll think it over," Johnny laughed harshly. "If you hear anything about Valerie Grey, let me know and you won't have to pay me anything. For all I know, you may



be running a big scale Black Market and that cache is just a small part of your stock."

"No!" Hudkin shouted. "That's all I've got! Honest, I was just trying to make a few dollars, and they'd put me out of business if I was reported." He raised his voice. "You can't do that to me!"

"I can," Johnny said coldly, "but I won't, because you may know where Val is, and I'm taking no chances. But if I leave town, don't worry as to whether or not I'll be back. I will."

## CHAPTER VI

### GRAVESTONE



WITH great pleasure Johnny left Hudkin and drove to Lila Heath's bungalow. Pincher was still there, ready for trouble and wishing it would come.

In Lila's dark room, Johnny went to work. He developed and printed the photographic copies of the pages of her diary first.

While these were drying, he developed the shots of Bert Bowman, Roy Portis and Miles Hudkin. He dried the negatives fast, printed up a set and compared them with the picture of the killer in the gas mask.

He frowned, realizing how poor was the shot of the killer. It was more a picture of the mask than anything else. The rest was hazy.

One by one he studied the pictures of the suspects and thought of the pictured men. Bowman, it seemed, had nothing to gain by the death of Lila. He had been in love with her—the unbiased opinion of Pincher Moran. Bowman was successful, seemed honest, and he had uncovered Miles Hudkin's Black Market cache.

Johnny grinned tightly, thinking of Hudkin. If the man had simply made a blanket denial of ownership of that cache in the mill, the photographer would have been stumped, but Hudkin had been guileless enough to fall into the trap, and furthermore offer a bribe.

Hudkin had characteristics of a murderer. Yet what could he have had against Lila unless she had unwittingly uncovered the main cache of his Black Market business?

Roy Portis figured prominently. He would gain by Lila's death, in spite of her hatred for him. She hadn't expected to die and it was a fact that Portis had frequented the old mill, and his excuse for that was flimsy.

Johnny turned out all lights except the ruby dark room bulb, and lit a cigarette. He could think better in near darkness.

He considered Val's first letter. She had written it with some substance that disturbed the paper fibres enough to bring out her

tracing of the old mill in infra-red. She had cleverly told him to use that type of light for results.

He had gone to the old mill, but Val had either never been there or had been removed. That meant the killer must have known he was going to the mill. But how? Pincher Moran knew, and he had told Bert Bowman. But Bowman could not have found time to learn this and beat Johnny to the mill and remove Val to another hiding place.

Johnny thought of those small particles of brittle red substance he had found in the old mill. He fished them out of his pocket, used a large projector lens as a magnifying glass and studied them.

They were tiny bits of fingernail polish. Their color was like that which Val always wore.

Johnny almost bit his cigarette in half. Here was proof that Val had been there, probably so well tied up that only her fingers could move. She had scraped off some of the polish—the only possible method by which she could let him know when he came looking for her, as of course she had known he would, that she had been at the old mill.

Johnny had told all the suspects to what extent he would go to insure Val's safety. He hoped this would draw the man in the gas mask into the open once more and force his hand. If he, Johnny, could ever meet this man face to face, he would rip that gas mask off all right.

For another hour Johnny studied the photostats of Lila's diary. She hadn't appeared to consider her visit to the old mill important. But she did have a notation about one of those tombstones she was always hunting up.

With the pictures she had taken of it—there were three—she listed all lens openings, shutter speeds and light meter readings, as if she had wanted to get the most perfect shot she could. That meant she had intended it for publication. Pictures of hers like that had become famous.

Johnny called Pincher into the house and asked him about Lila's trip to the cemetery.

"That was the day she died," Pincher said sadly. "Yeah, I remember. She was like a kid with a big lollypop whenever she found one of them gravestones. This one was a honey. It's in the town burying ground about a mile north of here. You want to go see it?"

"I'd like nothing better," Johnny glanced out of a window. "It's almost dawn—light enough to see by and maybe photograph by. If Lila wanted this picture printed, it will be. I'll see to that. . . ."

THE graveyard was small, but in it were a number of ancient granite slabs, their lettering almost obliterated. Johnny and



Pincher found the stone which had interested Lila Heath.

Johnny photographed it from a couple of angles. Then he noticed a large, pointed stone with the name of Hartland Bowman, giving the date of his death as a year and a half earlier.

But this last resting place of one of Bert Bowman's relatives meant nothing to Johnny Wells. He took Pincher back to the bungalow, then drove to the hotel.

There was no message, but despite the early hour, Roy Portis was in the lobby, hidden by a newspaper. But that built-up shoe was a dead give-away.

Johnny went to his room, removed his coat and vest and dropped flat on the bed. Though he could never sleep, as long as Val was in danger. He had no thought of food either, although he hadn't eaten in hours. He just lay there, trying to figure things out.

Before long, his phone rang. When he answered, a hoarse voice spoke.

"I'm calling in reference to the safety of a certain party, Mr. Wells," the voice said. "She ain't feeling so well and could take a turn for the worse if you stick around."

"Maybe that certain party has already taken a turn for the worse," Johnny said grimly. "How do I know? Listen—I'll make a deal. I'll met you anywhere you say, under any conditions. Bring me definite proof that the party is alive. Do this, and I'll leave town five minutes later. I refuse to accept any other arrangements, especially since I think I'm getting closer to your neck, my friend."

"Be at Lila Heath's bungalow in one hour," the hoarse voice said. "Bring your camera just as it is now. Tell Pincher to get out and stay away. I'll bring the necessary proof. I don't want our mutual friend to suffer needlessly—any more than you do."

"Don't you think I know when I'm licked?" Johnny barked. "One hour then, and threats go both ways. If you don't show up, I'll hunt you down and twist your neck if it takes years! One hour!"

He donned coat and vest, slung the camera over one shoulder and hurried downstairs. Roy Portis had disappeared. The desk clerk said he had left almost as soon as Johnny had gone to his room.

"I don't believe I told you," Johnny said confidentially. "But I'm a newspaperman. Tell me, what kind of a fellow is Bert Bowman?"

"Bert?" The clerk smiled. "Real nice. He's got a good little business. Makes wooden novelties. Has half a dozen men working for him. Works hard himself too."

"Who was Hartland Bowman?" Johnny queried.

The clerk frowned. "I don't seem to know

anyone by that name. Or wait—that must have been Bert's uncle. He died out West some place, and Bert had the body brought here to be buried in the family plot. I'd forgotten. Nobody remembered Hartland, I guess."

"Thanks," Johnny said. "If anybody wants me, I'll be back in a couple of hours."

He drove to Lila Heath's bungalow, awakened Pincher and sent him to town for some photographic supplies he had "forgotten." Pincher would be a long time finding what he had been sent for—if ever.

Then Johnny sat down in the living room to wait. The killer had ordered him to bring his camera along. That meant Johnny Wells must have been seen taking pictures over the route which Lila had covered. But how could any of those pictures make murder necessary? He frowned. Well, the killer now had the same reason for murdering him as he'd had for killing Lila. Johnny, however, was primed for trouble. He courted it, if it would bring him face to face with the man in the gas mask.

Johnny fretted over the enforced wait, but finally he heard a car approaching. It stopped, well down the road. Johnny went out on the porch. The car didn't move. He turned to reenter the house and received a shock. There were two men in the living room! They had entered through the rear, of course. And each held a gun.

"Are you the people I'm supposed to meet?" Johnny asked.

"Hand over that camera," one of them snarled.

He was a pudgy man, with eyes set deep and too close together. He had all the earmarks of a killer. The other man was mousy, but held his gun as if he could use it. Johnny slipped the camera case off his shoulder and handed the whole thing over.

"Sit down," the pudgy man snapped. "Make a move and we'll massage you with steel. Morty, clean out that dark room. All cameras and stuff. Dump everything out the back window."

AS THE mousy crook hurried to obey those orders, Johnny Wells leaned back comfortably.

"What's 'Morty' for?" he asked. "Mortician? He looks like one."

"Shut up!" The pudgy man stepped forward as if to enforce the order, but thought better of it. "You're here to see a man. Okay—you'll see him. What happens to you afterwards depends on how you act. It don't make any difference to me whether we bump you or pin a rose on you."

Morty came back and reported the dark room cleaned out of cameras and anything Johnny might use as a weapon. He was or-



dered to stand up. They searched him, then Morty nudged him with a gun and indicated the door to the dark room.

"Y'see," he explained casually, "the man you'll talk to don't want to be seen. He's bashful. So you'll talk to him in the dark. Now go on in there and wait. We'll bring him in in a couple of minutes."

Johnny entered the dark room. The door closed and was quickly locked.

Johnny Wells hadn't counted on a couple of professional thugs, and their presence certainly complicated things. He was neatly trapped.

More than likely the killer would face him with a gun, or they might even have decided to murder him and then Val.

The killer would talk to him. That much was certain, from the elaborate steps which had been taken for the interview. And the presence of the two professional gunmen indicated that something big was motivating the main killer.

As usual, Johnny was mainly concerned with using photography as a means of circumventing the crook. But a photographer needs a camera, and he was without one. He turned on the ruby light in the dark room. The place had been well stripped, but he did notice an odd lens on the bench. Morty had overlooked that, or had not understood what it was. A lens, however, was worthless without the rest of the equipment that went with it.

"If I had a camera," Johnny mused. "If I could get a close-up shot of that mystery man, I might get somewhere."

He paced the floor, racking his brains. Suddenly he stopped in his tracks.

"I'll make one!" he thought, and even with that thought he was at the bench and working. Lila had a lot of film, both roll and cut-sheet, and Marty had not bothered with this.

Johnny found some stiff cardboard and hastily cut it into required sizes. There was plenty of paste, plenty of black paper. He lined the pieces of cardboard with this black paper. Working with furious speed, he assembled them and fastened them with more paste and paper until he had a square box about the size of an average Brownie. The front and back were not yet in place.

He found rubber bands, snapped them over the cardboard which was to form the back. Then, working with the front piece of similar size, he cut a round hole in the middle of it. Over this he quickly pasted some of the thin black paper. He affixed this to the box and found some pins which Lila had used in her work.

Taking one of these, he carefully made a pin-hole through the thin paper pasted over the hole in the front of the makeshift box.

This done, he handled the whole business with extreme care.

With only the safety light burning, he took a piece of the cut-sheet film and slipped it under the two rubber bands so that it was firmly held in place. Next he taped the whole thing to the back of the box.

Now he had a camera—a simple type used in pinhole photography, the most elemental picture taking in the world. Without lens or shutter, but he hoped to get a shot at the killer.

Fortunately, he had been allowed sufficient time to fashion his home-made camera. It was crude, but it was light tight and would work, with a certain amount of luck.

Johnny then placed one chair at the end of the long table in the middle of the dark room. He put the innocent-looking black cardboard box on the table, masking it with a couple of books on photography. He placed a couple of other books on top of the camera. It didn't look like a camera.

He did all this with the safety light on. Now he exchanged the safety light for a white bulb, but was careful not to turn this white bulb on. Finished, he sat down directly beneath the light fixture and made sure he could reach it promptly.

**T**HEN the curtains in the doorway moved. No light was admitted, because those curtains hung within the door and formed a shield. Someone stepped in, fumbled around, and Johnny heard the chair scrape.

This man knew the layout. So much was evident, but this knowledge was shared by all three suspects. Hudkin had been in the house when Johnny had first arrived, Roy Portis must have been there often, and certainly Bowman knew the place.

"Well," the unseen man said, "I'm here to prove that your Miss Grey is alive and safe—so far. You will examine the evidence, satisfy yourself, then go back to New York and forget you ever heard of this town. After a certain length of time has passed, we shall release Miss Grey."

"Fair enough," Johnny said tightly. "But I just want to warn you. What I know—which is quite a lot—has been written down and put in a safe place. If anything happens to me or Miss Grey, that evidence will get to the proper authorities, and it won't take them long to get on your trail."

"That's a lot of bosh, of course," the mystery man said, and kept his voice pitched so as to mask its true inflections. "You don't know a thing to write down. But it's all right. I know you're a clever young man. Are you prepared to examine the evidence and then obey me?"

"I'm ready," Johnny said and reached for the light.



As he turned it on the man in the chair jumped to his feet, swept one hand forward. It held a gun. The muzzle hit the light bulb and smashed it. The room was instantly plunged into darkness.

Johnny had noticed two things, however. The man wore the gas mask but when he had jumped up his feet had showed, and on the left foot was a built-up shoe—the type of shoe that Roy Portis wore. He wore no hat, but even in that swift flash of light it was plain to Johnny Wells that the hair that showed above the gas mask was a wig.

"That was idiotic!" the man said angrily. "If I hadn't been wearing a mask, you'd have been killed instantly!"

"I'm sorry," Johnny said. "I only wanted to see that evidence you spoke of, and needed a light."

"I'm leaving it on this table," the man snapped. "Examine it. One of my men will be waiting outside. Tell him if you are satisfied. Then wait at least five minutes before you leave."

The curtain rustled, and Johnny knew the man had gone. Quickly he jumped up, located the safety lamp and switched it on. Then he picked up his cardboard camera, seized another small piece of black paper and pasted it over the pin hole. The film, with its image, would be intact.

Just to be certain, however, he placed the home-made camera in one of the lightproof drawers, turned on the lights and looked at the evidence which was to convince him that Val was alive. It was her wrist-watch, her purse, gloves, and another note.

The note was terse, probably dictated, and told him nothing beyond the fact that Val was alive and well, so far. The ink on it was hardly dry.

## CHAPTER VII

### MOTIVE FOR MURDER



GLANCING at his watch, Johnny Wells saw that he still had a couple of minutes before he reported to the men waiting for him in the living room. He spent this time dunking the cut-sheet film from the cardboard camera into developer.

An image appeared. He transferred the negative to a fixing bath and dropped it into plain water. He left it there for a few seconds then tenderly placed it in a drawer to dry.

He parted the curtains, walked into the living room and met Pudgy, who still had his gun ready for business.

"I'll do what I'm told," Johnny said in a low voice.

"See that you do," Pudgy snapped. "If I see you again, it'll be as a target. Don't forget that."

Johnny backed out of the house, turned and ran toward the road. The car that had brought the two gunmen here was waiting to follow him. It was headed toward the city, and moved off before he could get to his own car. Johnny waited until it had vanished down the tree-lined road. Then he raced around the house to a bluff from which he could watch the car, which probably would pull off to a side of the road and wait for him.

There didn't seem to be any marker plates on it. They were probably well smeared with mud. The car rolled along at a moderate clip, then abruptly slowed down and veered toward the side of the road.

Johnny saw the rear door open and someone was hurled out. His heart dropped to his shoes. They had doublecrossed him! They had killed Val right after she had written that note and her body had been in that car while they had intimidated him.

Mumbling savage oaths, Johnny Wells raced down the knoll. His brain was reeling when he reached the spot where he had seen the body hurled from the car. The grass there was high, but he found the body quickly enough—that of a man.

Johnny heaved a great sigh of relief. He turned the body over and gave a sharp exclamation. It was the body of Roy Portis, and he had been shot twice through the head.

Johnny wondered if Roy had hired those gunmen, had confided to them all the details of whatever grisly business lay behind the murder of Lila Heath, and if they had killed him to take over. If so, Val was in greater danger than ever.

He searched the body, but found nothing of importance. Then he raced back to the bungalow and into the dark room. There he found the negative fairly dry and made a blow-up enlargement of the frame. The pin-hole camera had done a good job. The head and shoulders of the gas-mask-wearing crook were clear.

He hurried to his car, fished the three pictures of Bowman, Portis and Hudkin from a hiding place and hastily did some comparison work. He wondered why he took the trouble. For he knew now that the disguised crook had worn a shoe like Roy Portis wore to throw suspicion on Lila's husband.

But Johnny made the comparison just the same. He stowed the pictures away once more, got behind the wheel of his car and went back to the little town of Shelton. There he made two long distance phone calls, returned to his hotel and packed hastily.



He was checking out when Bert Bowman entered. Bowman eyed the suitcase.

"Checkmate?" he asked.

Johnny nodded. "I know when to give up. I still have a little something to go on, though. It probably won't help, but it's worth trying anyhow. You said you wanted to help. Want to come along to New York with me?"

Bowman whistled. "That's rather short notice, but okay. Pick me up in about ten minutes."

Bowman was ready when Johnny pulled up before his house, and they drove back to New York. They rehashed the odd circumstances of the case and Johnny told how he had seen the killer, only to find he wore a gas mask which covered his features exceptionally well. He told of finding the corpse of Roy Portis. Bowman agreed that Portis must have been killed by the professional crooks.

"It strikes me that way too," Johnny said. "That's why I want to pull this one last stunt. I won't tell you about it. You might discourage me, and it wouldn't take much to do that. If only Val were safe and unharmed, I wouldn't be afraid to sail into the whole pack of wolves, but they've got me pinned to a wall."

When they reached New York, Johnny drove downtown. Finally he came to a stop in front of the Club Eloise. Here was where the whole thing had begun. The radio which had attracted his attention, was still blaring away—music this time.

"Ever been here before?" Johnny asked Bowman.

"Never." Bowman eyed the place. "Classy joint. What's inside?"

"A nice little gambling business, and a man who may help me. He owns the place, and we get along okay. Come along."

**B**OWMAN followed Johnny to the door, and went past him into the club, deserted now. Johnny piloted him to the entrance of the gambling rooms. Again he stepped back and let Bowman precede him.

The small-town manufacturer walked down the narrow corridor until he reached the thick glass door. The handle saying "PULL" was still there, but Bowman pushed. He held the door for Johnny, grinned at him, and they walked on.

Suddenly Johnny grabbed Bowman, twisted him around and whammed home a blow to the stomach. It had all the stored-up rage he possessed, and it knocked wind and strength out of Bowman. He doubled up, grasping at his middle with both hands.

Johnny hit him again, this time on the jaw. Then he clamped one hand around Bowman's throat and pinned him to the wall. A quick search revealed a shiny automatic in the inside pocket of Bowman's coat. John-

ny put its muzzle directly over Bowman's heart.

"Okay, you rat!" he said softly. "One squawk, and I'll blow your heart out. Remember, I love Valerie Grey. Don't try to deny you've been here before. You know about that trick door. It sends a signal when it's pulled, and mugs come down to see who wants in. You pushed it. An accident, you'd say if you could talk. But try to argue yourself out of a picture."

"Yes, I took a picture of you wearing the gas mask. A head and shoulders shot. I also took a similar picture of you down in the well, without the mask. Comparing the two pictures gives you away, Bowman. You wore Portis' built-up shoe to try and trick me if I managed to get a look. But the picture of Portis and Hudkin doesn't agree with the masked man. Your picture does—the same ears, forehead, same shoulders and hands and neck. You were wearing a wig, instead of the hat you wore in the hotel, but that didn't fool me. You met me in the hotel lobby to make sure I was carrying out my promise. Well, promises don't go when they're made under duress."

Bowman gave a violent upward kick. Johnny was ready for that, and brought down the gun butt. It struck Bowman squarely on the head and he sank to the floor. Johnny grabbed him in time to prevent a crashing sound, laid him out neatly and hit him once more for luck. He pulled down a heavy drape, rolled the unconscious Bowman in it and carried him to a room off the hall.

He went upstairs lightly, reached the room where Al Fiske ruled his gambling empire, and knocked sharply on the door.

"Open up, Al!" he called. "It's me—Bowman."

The door opened. Johnny plunged through it, gun in hand. Al Fiske was alone. He started to open a drawer, but thought better of it. The way Johnny pointed that automatic was convincing. The photographer went around the desk and took a gun from the drawer. He dropped it into his pocket.

"Sit down, Al," he said conversationally. "I'll let you listen while I make a telephone call."

He dialed Police Headquarters, asked for his close friend, Sergeant Martin and briefly explained what had happened.

"Send enough men," he told Martin, "and surround the place. Cover the whole block. They may have a tunnel exit. These mugs are mixed up in a murder, so shoot to kill if they don't stop. . . Me? I'm okay so far, but if I get it, you'll find Al Fiske lying right beside me. I'll have killed him."

He hung up and looked at Fiske.

"Okay, Al, the game is over. So are you unless I get cooperation. Bowman is down-



stairs, packaged and ready for delivery to a jury that'll send him to the chair for killing Lila Heath and a punk named Roy Portis. I know how he did both murders, but I'm not too sure why. Also, before we go any further, you might produce Valerie Grey."

"Who is she?" Fiske asked.

"Produce her!" Johnny snapped and the gun came up to dead center.

Fiske recognized the light gleaming in Johnny's eyes. He picked up the telephone.

"Tell Fat to bring the girl up here. Nobody else is to come with him. You guys stay put no matter what happens, understand? We took on more than we can handle, and there's going to be trouble. No fireworks. It's hopeless. Tell Fat to hurry."

Johnny walked over beside the door and lined himself up against it. When the door opened, the pudgy crook entered. He held Val by one wrist. Johnny tapped Pudgy on the shoulder.

"Next time we met, you were going to use me as a target. Remember?"

**P**UDGE let out a yelp and dropped Val's wrist.

Johnny deftly passed Val his gun, and she covered Fiske. Johnny winked at her, ducked a wide swing from Pudge and closed in to pummel the man mercilessly. It felt good to send home those driving blows. The punk had had his hands on Val, and that was enough for Johnny Wells. Pudge could fight, but he didn't know that Johnny had once been a contender for a championship.

In less than three minutes, Pudge sank to the floor whimpering. Johnny grasped him by the hair and tilted his head back. He slugged the man hard on the jaw, searched him, and added another gun to his growing arsenal.

Then he held Val tightly.

"They didn't hurt me," she said. "Oh, Johnny, I drew that picture with some nail polish remover I had in my bag. I knew it would show under infra-red. They were holding me in the old mill, but as soon as the note was finished, they took me to Bowman's house. Then to this place. On the way they—they shot a man and threw his body out of the car."

"I know," Johnny said. "I know all about it and, believe me, I'm sore. I'm mad enough to shoot anybody who bucks me one inch further. How about it, Fiske? Have you decided to talk?"

Fiske shrugged. "Why not? Sooner or later a man's luck runs out. Mine has now. I only did this because I was forced into it. Bowman owns this joint. He owns a lot of places like this and every one is as crooked as Nazi propaganda. He's my boss, and I did as I was ordered."

"Even to holding Alonzo Gregg a year and a half ago, eh, Al?"

Fiske started to rise. So did Johnny's gun, and the gambler sat down again. He wasn't quite as cool.

"Bowman took him out of here," he said. "I don't know what happened, but I suppose he was killed."

"Alonzo Gregg?" Val burst out. "Johnny, he's the man you were searching for when we heard the broadcast about Lila's death! How on earth are they connected?"

"By a thread—a little link of coincidence," Johnny said. "I'm not sure myself. As soon as Sergeant Martin arrives, I'll check up."

Martin and his men burst into the place with everything from tommy-guns to tear gas. There was no resistance, not even from Bowman. He still slept from the effects of Johnny's gun butt. Johnny sat down behind Fiske's desk and used the telephone. He was grinning when he finally hung up after the third call.

"Got it!" he gloated. "Everything turned out as I figured. Alonzo Gregg made a hobby of investigating gambling joints. He was a born gambler himself and hated to be cheated. Somehow he got onto the fact that the joints Bowman was running were crooked. He was foolish enough to make a direct accusation and got himself murdered.

"Then Bowman had a corpse on his hands, one that got hotter and hotter as the body became colder. Gregg was an important man. If his body were found, the police would tear the town inside out. But if he just dropped from sight, no such investigation would be made.

"The best way to dispose of a corpse is to bury it—legally—with pomp and ceremony. So Bowman had the body shipped to his town and said it was the body of his Uncle Hartland Bowman. But Bowman figured he was safe because nobody had heard of Hartland for years. Everything went off nicely. He buried Gregg and planted a nice tombstone over him bearing the name of Hartland Bowman in nice big letters. They're digging up that grave now."

"But your investigation of Gregg's disappearance showed he left the night-club and went to his hotel, but vanished in front of it somewhere," Val said doubtfully.

"I know," Johnny nodded. "I've got a pretty good idea though, that when these monkeys talk, we'll find out it was someone else, wearing Gregg's clothes and possibly made up to look like him."

"Oh!" Val pursed her lips. "I'm beginning to see."

"Sure," Johnny said. "Along comes Lila then and takes a picture of an old gravestone at the cemetery. However, the picture also included a nice view of Hartland Bowman's



tombstone. Lila told Bert Bowman it was going to be published, and he got the jitters. He'd learned Uncle Hartland was still alive out West, hale and hearty. He might undertake an investigation if he saw a tombstone in his family plot with his name on it. Like all killers, Bowman had to resort to murder again.

"He did it cleverly, hoping the Army would get the blame. He planted a bomb in Lila's utility case and set it to blow when she was flying above the field. The Army does everything by the split-second, so he was safe in timing it. He even included a few chunks of ack-ack shell as a convincer that some of the boys had accidentally slipped live ammunition into a gun.

"He also got scared when he found out we were coming to investigate her death. I think Fiske had us shadowed, and one of his men overheard us talking about Lila. Anyway, Bowman put on a uniform, posed as a sentry, and blazed away at us. Also he did his best to pin the blame onto Portis. I think Portis was wise and maybe blackmailing Bowman. Portis was capable of that."

**V**ALERIE broke in eagerly. "It was why they shot him," she said. "I heard them arguing."

"Then that's cleaned up," Johnny said. "Incidentally, Bowman's little factory is engaged in manufacturing crooked gambling equipment. It was just raided by state troopers. Miles Hudkin—remind me to report him to the OPA—got mixed up in it all when he used Bowman's old mill without asking permission. For a while I was pretty certain Hudkin was our man. . . So that's it. I think Lila will sleep better now. Take over, Sarge, and don't be too gentle with Bowman. He's as much a punk as the lowest of Al Fiske's hirelings."

"And what about us?" Val asked as they walked out of the gambling house, arm in arm.

"Been doing much eating lately?" Johnny asked.

"Eat?" Val said musingly. "Now where have I heard that before? Those men were not hospitable enough to furnish food. Hey—what are we waiting for? There's a restaurant across the street."

Next Month: IT COMES UP MURDER, Novelet by C. S. Montanye

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# CLUE OF THE CLEVER CORPSE

By  
JOHN L. BENTON

*Sergeant Dan Burton of Homicide  
Thinks White Mice Mean Hard  
Luck for him, Until—*

**D**ETEKTIVE-SERGEANT Dan Burton, looking smart in tweeds, was striding briskly down the seventh floor corridor of the Stanley Building, heading for Attorney John Keene's office, when he glanced down, and halted abruptly. He blinked and looked again. He was suddenly feeling unhappy.

"Pink elephants or purple crocodiles," he murmured sadly. "But not white mice."

The little mouse that was scampering around on the floor was white—there was no doubt of that. It watched Burton out of tiny pink eyes, with interest. The little rodent seemed not to be in the least alarmed by the nearness of the lean-faced man who watched him.

"Go away!" ordered Burton, shifting the topcoat he carried over his left arm. "Some people think black cats are hard luck, but with me it's white mice."

The mouse decided he liked the man. He moved closer, and the sergeant watched with horror out of all proportion to the cause of it. But of course the white mouse didn't know that although Burton was one of the toughest detectives at Headquarters, mice and rats gave him the creeps.

"No, we won't be friends," he was announcing firmly, when from down the hall came a shrill feminine scream.

It was nine o'clock in the evening and most of the offices along the corridor were locked and dark. Burton forgot all about the mouse as a stout, gray-haired cleaning woman, screaming at the top of her lungs, backed out of one office that was lighted.

He hurried to her. She saw him, but stood as if paralyzed, looking at him, the fright in her face plain.

"I just turned on the lights and there he



John Keene was  
slumped over  
his desk



"was!" she burst out. "Lyin' there across his desk with a drink in his hand like he had gone to sleep." His voice rose. "But he's dead—dead!"

"Just keep cool," Burton said soothingly. "I'll take care of everything. I'm from Headquarters—a detective."

"A detective, praise be!" chattered the woman. "Then it's lucky Molly O'Toole is this night. It is not the likes of me that would be alone with a corpse, that I would not."

Dan Burton paid no further attention to her as he stepped into the reception room of John Keene's offices. No one was in sight, so the detective-sergeant walked to the open door of the private office beyond. As he entered Molly O'Toole followed, but stopped in the doorway.

JOHN KEENE was seated at his desk. He had slumped forward so that his head was resting on one arm. It looked as if he had passed out from too much to drink, except that he was too still for that.

"Nearly frightened me to death, it did," Molly O'Toole quavered. "I cleaned the outer office and then came in here and turned on the light—and there he was, just like you see him now! I shook him, thinking it was sleeping he was—and it was then I saw he was dead!"

Burton thought of babbling brooks, and decided he liked the sound of rushing water much better than he did the sound of Molly O'Toole's voice. It could hardly be considered musical, but it did seem to go on and on.

"He's dead, all right," Burton said grimly as he examined the man at the desk. "Looks like he took poison."

"Oh, so it's suicide, is it?" exclaimed Mrs. O'Toole. "And him such a nice man and so polite and all. Shure and you never can tell about them quiet kind. Just like I was telling my daughter when she was running around with that actor feller. Really soft-spoken he was, and you know what?"

"What?" Burton asked automatically as he picked up the phone and dialed Homicide.

"Eddie turned out to be a fine lad and married my daughter," Molly O'Toole said triumphantly. "Happy as the day is long, they are—just a pair of love birds."

"Hello—Homicide?" said Burton over the wire. "Give me Inspector Clark . . . This is Dan Burton, Inspector . . . I'm at the Stanley Building. Room Seven-fourteen. Send the Squad up . . . There's been a murder here. A lawyer named John Keene . . . Sure, I'll be here waiting." He hung up and looked at the cleaning woman.

"Murder it is now, and a moment ago you said it was suicide!" exclaimed Molly

O'Toole. "Like I always say, you can never trust a man to tell the truth."

"You said it was suicide, I didn't," Burton said firmly. He looked at her intently. "Do you like white mice?"

"White mice?" repeated Mrs. O'Toole, and gaped at him.

"I saw one in the corridor just before you screamed," Burton told her. "It seemed right friendly. If we had hung around together much longer it probably would have suggested we go out and have a drink."

"I—I've got to finish my cleanin'," Molly O'Toole said nervously, backing away. "I'll be down the hall if you need me for anything."

Judging by the speed of her departure she obviously considered Burton crazy and a man to be given a wide berth. But Burton did not smile as he watched her go. He was thinking of John Keene, who had been one of his close friends. Keene had suggested that the sergeant drop around to his office and pick him up and they would do the town together, since Burton was off duty tonight.

But now Keene was dead—and Detective-sergeant Burton was grimly determined to find his killer. But as he stared at the corpse he did wonder for a minute what had happened to the little white mouse. Where had it come from? Could it have been with whoever had been here with Keene earlier in the evening? The attorney had told Burton over the phone to meet him here because he had to stay late in order to talk to a client.

"Empty glass in his hand that might have contained poison," muttered Burton as he studied the murdered man. "And the cleaning woman found Keene here when she turned on the lights. He wouldn't have turned out the lights if he was going to commit suicide. He'd have wanted to make sure what he was drinking."

Moving closer, Burton stared at a small hole in the back of the attorney's coat. It looked as if it had been made by a small caliber bullet—probably a .22. So Keene had been shot, not poisoned.

"I beg your pardon," a cool voice said from the doorway. "Is Mr. Keene ill?"

A stout bald-headed man, a stranger to the sergeant, was standing in the doorway. He was in his shirt sleeves and there was a faint streak on the collar of his white shirt.

"Who are you?" Burton demanded.

"My name's Ned Franklin," said the stout man. "I have an office down the hall. Is there something wrong with Keene?"

"He's dead," Burton said shortly. "Murdered! I'm Detective-sergeant Burton, and I'm waiting for the Homicide Squad. What's your business, Mr. Franklin?"

"Why, I run a theatrical booking agency,"



said Franklin. "I used to be an actor myself, but decided an agency was more productive." He frowned heavily as he gazed at the corpse. "This is bad business. Keene was a friend of mine. I often dropped in to chat with him for a few minutes when we were both here working late."

"Did you happen to hear what might have been a shot tonight?" Burton asked. "Probably from a small-caliber gun?"

"A shot?" repeated Franklin. "Why yes, I heard a sound like that, but I just thought it was a car backfiring down in the street. You mean that Keene was shot?"

"That's right," Burton nodded. He was beginning to wonder if the Homicide Squad was arriving by slow freight. "But why was he killed? I'd like to know the motive for the murder."

"I heard Mr. Keene quarreling with someone—a client I took it to be," Franklin said unexpectedly. "Their voices were plenty loud."

**B**URTON picked up a pad that was lying on the desk. He hadn't paid any attention to it before. Now he saw that on it a conversation had been written down. One person had written:

It looks like I will be able to adjust your claim for you without any trouble.

Then in another handwriting:

That's fine. I'm very grateful. When will we be sure of it?

"I'll be in my office if you want me, Sergeant," Franklin said. "The sight of poor Keene makes me a little sick, it does."

"All right, Franklin," said Burton, without looking up from the pad. "I may want to talk to you again later. You better not leave the building."

He found a memo on the attorney's desk calendar. It read:

Appointment with David Stark at 8:30 P. M. Can be reached at California 7-019 after six.

Burton picked up the phone and dialed the number. A woman answered.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Stark please," he said, and in a moment, "Oh, I see . . . Well, will you ask him to come to John Keene's office right away, please? It is most important. Thank you." Burton hung up.

The Homicide Squad arrived and the detective-sergeant told them what had happened. They went to work taking pictures of the corpse as they waited for an assistant medical examiner to arrive. Within half an

hour the assistant M.E. had examined the dead man and declared that Keene had been killed by a bullet that had entered his back and lodged in his heart. The glass he had held in his hand contained bicarbonate of soda.

David Stark arrived as the M.E. gave his information. He was a meek-looking little middle-aged man who appeared too frightened even to talk. He identified himself by handing Burton a card with his name and a few details about himself printed on it.

"Say, Sarge," one of the Homicide men said, "maybe you'd be interested to know Headquarters has information that there's a man in this building who is suspected of working a blackmail racket. He runs a theatrical agency. Man named Franklin. A lot of people call him Soda Franklin, they say."

"Soda!" exclaimed Burton, as his glance went to the glass that had been in the hand of the corpse. "That's it! Keene was trying to tell us that Franklin was his killer! Keene must have grabbed up that glass of bicarb as he was dying, hoping it would tell us something—that we would get the Soda nickname from that. Pretty far-fetched, but it was all he could do to point to his murderer."

"Some of you men go get Franklin and bring him here," ordered the officer in charge of the Homicide men. "Make it snappy."

As two men went out into the hall, the stout, gray-haired cleaning woman burst into the office, much excited. She pointed accusingly at David Stark.

"It's this little man that I was after seein' comin' into this office not more than twenty minutes before I come in here to clean!" cried Mrs. O'Toole. "That it was now! It's him it was, and talkin' loud to Mr. Keene like he was mad about somethin'."

The little white mouse crawled out of a pocket of Burton's topcoat. It ran across the floor to Mrs. O'Toole. She saw it, but paid no attention. The two men who had been sent for "Soda" Franklin rushed into the office.

"No sign of Franklin!" one of them explained. "Looks like he's skipped."

"He's still here." Burton shrugged, and his eyes bored into Mrs. O'Toole. "I've had enough of your female impersonation, Franklin. You overdid it. Telling us that Keene and Stark had a violent quarrel—and that you heard loud voices."

"I ain't Franklin!" shouted the accused "woman." "And I did hear them quarrelin'!"

"That's impossible," snapped Burton. "Stark happens to be deaf and dumb, and his interview with Keene was in writing. It's all here on this pad." He took one swift step and grabbed the gray wig off the bald head



of the fake Mrs. O'Toole. "We've got you, Franklin. You got into that disguise so you could hang around Keene's office without him noticing you and get a chance to shoot him—because he was onto your blackmail racket and was going to turn you in. He wouldn't have paid much attention to the cleaning woman."

"You win," Franklin said bleakly. He glared at the mouse. "I thought you were in your cage in my office. You must have got out and began running around the hall again."

"If you had been a woman—the Mrs. O'Toole you claimed to be," said Burton, "you would have been frightened when that

mouse came toward you a few minutes ago. You didn't even pay any attention."

A thin, tired woman appeared in the doorway. She looked at everyone blankly, as she stood there with a mop and pail in her hand.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I'll never get this floor done tonight. And me an hour late because somebody phoned me and told me my daughter was sick, and she wasn't at all."

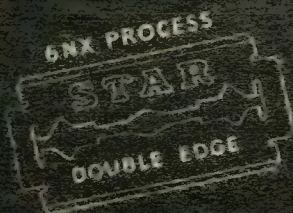
"Looks like Soda is a fizzle," said Burton. "There's your murderer, boys. Take him away." He looked at the white mouse, running over his shoe. "Say, you're kinda cute." He picked up the little rodent. "And you've been a big help to me. Maybe I'll keep you as a pet!"



**War Veteran Chris Mathews Suddenly Becomes the Victim of a Double Murder Frame—and Smashes into Action to Prove His Innocence and Find the Real Killer in TWO RINGS FOR DEATH, a Gripping Complete Crime Novelet by ERIC A. PROVOST in Next Month's Issue!**

**DON'T BE CHEEKY,  
MISTER!**

**WHY NOT?  
I SHAVE WITH  
STAR BLADES!**



**4 for 10¢**





The ten-gauge roared, and Frank crumpled as though he'd been hit by a giant's club



## An Exciting Complete Crime Novelet

# THE DEAD

### CHAPTER I

#### DEAD MAN'S CHAIR

I LEFT my car on the narrow dirt road and went up a board walk to the steps of the Goady farmhouse. A heavy blanket of fog, cold and damp on my hands and face, moved sluggishly around my body as though trying to hold me back. It laid a pall of silence over everything. The creak of the sagging veranda under my feet seemed loud enough to be heard in the next county.

As I faced the screen door with its gray,

crusted paint peeling off in chunks, the warning of the Sheriff of San Angelo came to mind, and his offer to send a deputy along. I remembered my reply that insurance investigators don't need deputies.

That had been in his office. Now something about the Goady place started me wondering just what insurance investigators did need. Brains, maybe.

The Los Angeles office of Western States Indemnity had sent me north to investigate a claim of accidental death. The policy was written to pay double in such an eventuality. The insured, one Amos Goady, had been

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*Through the Fog, Fearsome Shadows Stalk the*

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# REACH FAR By R. SPRAGUE HALL

blown to pieces while dynamiting stumps on his farm. Certain aspects of the case suggested to the officials of Western States that there might be something rotten in the county of San Angelo.

I opened the screen, gave the door a hard application of knuckles and waited. Nothing happened. The house just sat there holding its breath and the fog sifted in closer to find out what was going on. A quick look behind me revealed nothing more than the dim, familiar shape of my coupé, and beyond, through the shifting milky veil, a faded green fringe that was the beginning

of acres of lima beans.

I like quiet as much as the next fellow, but this was overdoing it. I gave the door the heel of my fist and this time it moved a couple of inches. It was unlatched. I got a whiff of warmer air and the musty smell of old furnishings.

With the warmer air came a sound—a steady, unmistakable creak, creak, creak. Through the crack I could see across the hall and a narrow section of the room beyond. Something was moving. It was the rocker of a chair, pumping up and down. I gave the rocker a thin smile. This was going to be

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***Goady Farmhouse, Bringing Grim Danger and Doom!***

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lovely. A deaf Goady to shout at.

A gentle shove widened the aperture so I could see better. I could see much better, and what I saw froze the smile on my face. The fog reached through my coat and counted my vertebrae with cold fingers.

The whole chair was visible. It was one of those Victorian affairs with a walnut frame. The seat and tall back were covered with shiny black haircloth. At the top of the back was a cluster of carved grapes. It was a nice chair, if you go for that sort of stuff, and it was rocking briskly with that little jerky push the foot gives it on the back seat. It was a cozy little scene but for one trifling detail. The chair was empty!

**I** FOUND myself crossing the hall. The chair was a dozen feet away. It stood near a window where the light was good, and there were no threads, wires, or other visible means of motion.

In the doorway I stopped and forced my attention elsewhere. It was a room of contrasts. The paper had faded to a point where its flowers could no longer be identified. There was a large oval rug on the floor whose colors time also had improved. In one corner stood a shiny, expensive-looking radio console. In another, an elderly what-not supported vases, sea shells, some dried cat-tails and a modern electric clock. The ruffled curtains were clean and starched and had been mended often.

Everywhere I looked, the motion of that chair was in the tail of my eye and its infernal creak, creak, creak in my ears.

Against the wall to my right stood a worn tapestry sofa. A girl was sitting there in profile to me. It was a nice profile. She had pale, taffy-colored hair, done up on her head. Her nose had a bit of a tilt and there were freckles on it. I don't believe she realized I was there.

Her eyes were fixed on the chair and her head moved slightly up and down in time with its motion.

I was still staring at her when I suddenly became conscious that something was happening to the rocker. It had stopped. Not a gradual dying down, but an abrupt stopping as though the one who sat there had planted his feet on the floor and leaned forward. The tilt of the chair suggested leaning forward. Then, very gently, it resumed its normal balance.

The girl turned her face toward me. Her eyes were a soft blue-gray and at the moment a little wild. She looked at me as though nothing that could have appeared in the doorway would have surprised her much. I didn't blame her, I was feeling a little that way myself.

She seemed about to speak to me when a

grip like a bear trap descended on my shoulder and I was spun around.

"Lookin' for somebody, mister?"

Levis and a soiled khaki shirt covered the tall lanky frame of the man who held me at arm's length. There was a blue stubble on his chin and a shock of straight dark hair hung down over his forehead shading the narrow-set, watchful eyes.

"I'm from the Western States Indemnity," I snapped.

He took his bony fingers out of my shoulder and managed a grimace that was intended to be cordial.

"You bring the money?"

I shook my head.

"Why not?"

"When the company is satisfied as to the complete validity of your claim, a check will be mailed to you."

His lips were a thin hard line. "Trying to beat us out of it, eh?"

"Not at all. All companies investigate claims. After all, twenty thousand isn't exactly hay."

He considered this for a moment, looking at the floor and slowly rubbing the back of one ear. Finally he nodded.

"All right," he said sullenly, "start investigatin'—but you're wastin' everybody's time. Sheriff Dan Coombs knows all about the accident. Him and the coroner. And, say—you got a card or somethin'?"

He took, between grimy fingers, the pasteboard I handed him.

"Alexander McPhie, Special Investigator," he said. "Humph! I'm Frank Goady." He did not offer to shake hands.

"I want to talk to your brother, too," I said.

He turned and shouted down the hall. There was a muffled answer from somewhere in the rear.

I looked at the girl who had risen and was watching our faces anxiously. Frank Goady jerked his head in her direction.

"She's our half-sister, Emelie," he said, and grinned. "She's—" He made a spiral motion with his index finger at his temple. "Imagines all sorts of stuff. Gettin' worse since Pa got blowed up."

"I'm doing no such thing, Frank," the girl said wearily. "I tell you, Pa's chair—"

"Aw, shut up!"

A heavy step in the hall interrupted the two. Joshua Goady was shorter than his brother and ran more to fat. He had a round face and a pair of quick little eyes that reminded you of a smart pig. The eyes were giving me a brief and amused going-over.

"What yuh got here, Frank?" he asked. "Fuller brush man?"

No one smiled.

"Name's McPhie," Frank said gloomily.



"From the insurance company."

"Boy, oh boy! What did he bring the mazuma in—twenties?"

"Mazuma, my foot! He's here to investigate us."

"Oh!" Joshua's little eyes were speculative. "Oh—sure."

THERE was an awkward silence as the three stood staring at me. "Can we sit down somewhere?" I finally said.

"Yep, right here," Frank replied. "Try Pa's old rocker. It's right comfortable."

As I moved casually toward the chair, I found Emelie's wide gray-blue eyes fixed on mine. The negative motion of her head was slight.

"No, thanks," I said. "This one will suit me better."

The brothers sat on the sofa and Emelie took a straight-backed chair in the corner. She folded her work-reddened hands quietly in the lap of her print dress. Frank sat stiffly erect, watching me with wary, suspicious eyes. Joshua lolled back, crossed and recrossed his legs and would not look at me at all.

"On the morning of January tenth," I said, "the insured, one Amos Goady, was blasting stumps on the section of your farm called north hill. Is that correct?"

Frank nodded.

"He was alone at the time?"

The brothers looked at each other, then Frank nodded again. I consulted the paper spread out on my knee.

"Upon hearing an unusually loud detonation, you two men went to investigate. You found a hole in the ground and a few fragments of your father's body and clothing scattered around. A nearly full box of dynamite had exploded."

"Yep, that's right," Frank said.

Emelie's face was drained of color. She was looking at her hands.

"Were you present at the time, Miss Goady?"

Emelie cleared her throat and said in almost a whisper:

"No, I was over at the Stevens' place."

"One of your neighbors?"

"Yeah," Joshua cut in. "She goes over almost every day to find out what old man Stevens has heard from Jim. She's kinda sweet on Jim Stevens."

Joshua slapped the side of his foot for emphasis. He was wearing a new pair of *huaraches*, a Mexican shoe woven from strips of leather.

Emelie's chin went up. "Jim is in the South Pacific," she said. "With the Marines."

"Sure," Joshua grinned, "and when the Japs get through with him he won't be much good to you. I'll bet by now they've—"

He made a gesture across his throat. "Eh, Frank?"

Frank Goady looked at his step-sister, then back at me. His thin lips twisted into a sadistic smile.

"Not necessarily," he said. "They probably chased him into the ocean and he never could swim good. Any more questions, Mr. McPhie?"

Emelie's eyes were filling and I felt my face getting red. If there was any evidence of patricide lying around that the Sheriff had overlooked, finding it would be a pleasure.

"Not now," I said gruffly, "but I want to go over the spot where the explosion occurred."

"Emelie'll take you." Frank was on his feet. "Me and Josh have got to get the cultivator goin'."

"Must be a job for the two of you to work this farm," I said.

"Help's mighty scarce."

"Sure is," Joshua put in. "We had a Mexican a while back but he left us. He—"

Frank gave his brother a little shove. "Get going, Josh. We wasted enough time already. How about the generator on the Fordson?"

"I rewound the coils and put in new brushes. She's as good as new."

So Joshua was an electrician. This gave me material for some new speculations. I watched the brothers go down the hall and was doing some thinking when the girl touched my arm shyly.

"I'll get my sweater," she said. "It's cold outside."

## CHAPTER II

### A HUMAN HAND



WE WALKED over plowed ground, Emelie and I, between seemingly endless rows of lima bean bushes. It was a hushed, gray world, with only the interminable green rows visible a few feet in any direction. I was ruining a good pair of shoes on the hard caked clods.

Presently, high above the fog, came the mighty drone of invisible motors.

"What are planes doing around here?" I asked.

"There's an Army training field about five miles east," Emelie said, over her shoulder. "Jim tried to get into that, but he didn't have quite enough schoolin'."

"Your step-brothers don't seem to like Jim very well," I observed.

She did not answer right away. We went on another dozen yards and then she stopped and faced me.

"They don't like anything I like," she said



abruptly. "Pa didn't either, for that matter. Jim thrashed Josh and Frank once when they stole and drunk up the money Ma left me when she died. They say, when they get the insurance money, they're going to have me locked up in some kind of an institution because they think I'm crazy. It's on account of Pa's chair. You don't think I'm crazy, do you?"

The eyes that looked anxiously into mine were clear and sane.

"Of course not," I said. "But why didn't you want me to sit in your father's rocker?"

A flush of embarrassment crept up from her white throat.

"This will sound silly," she said. "But Pa loved that chair. He used to sit there rocking all evening, sometimes. I like to think that his spirit still does. You won't believe this, but I have seen the chair rocking by itself. It was rocking today, just before you came in. I shouldn't have ever told my step-brothers about it." With a sad little smile she turned and went on again.

A few hundred feet beyond where the lima bushes ended, the ground began to rise gradually. There were uprooted stumps of trees scattered around. The girl stopped beside a shallow depression.

"It happened here," she said quietly. "It has been mostly filled in, so there's really nothing to see."

She was right about that. I looked around as cheerfully as a general looks over a lost battlefield. There was heavy breathing behind us, and a large mongrel dog lumbered up.

"Why, Scratch!" Emelie said. "Did you follow us all the way out here?"

Scratch came over, sniffed me amiably and wagged his tail. I stroked his mottled brown and white coat.

"Scratch is a good gopher dog," Emelie said. "Always diggin' around."

Girl and dog both watched me as I began to examine the ground closely in ever widening circles around the depression. The soil had been prepared for planting. There were no weeds, only the brown, upturned earth. It was a back-breaking job and apparently getting me nowhere. At one place, a dozen yards away, I did pick up something which I put away in an envelope.

"We may as well be starting back, Miss Goady," I said at last. "I've seen all I need to for my report."

I knew she was wondering what I had found on the ground, but she did not ask me. When we reached the rows of limas again I said:

"Your brothers had a Mexican helping them. When did he leave?"

"About a week ago. Why?"

"That was around the time the accident

occurred," I said. "He might be useful as a witness. Any idea where he went?"

Emelie shook her head. "Migratory workers don't leave forwarding addresses."

"Maybe not. But, speaking of Mexicans, where did Joshua get those new *huaraches* he's wearing?"

"From Silverstein's in San Angelo," Emelie told me. "He said so, anyway. What are you driving at, Mr. McPhie?"

I shrugged. "I just like to get the whole picture," I said.

The fog had been lifting as we walked. The sun, touching the horizon now, saluted the dying day with a sword of yellow light. It bathed everything with the bright unreality of a stage setting.

As we neared the house, I saw the Goadys working the cultivator a quarter of a mile away. That was just where I wanted them.

On the front steps the girl turned and faced me.

"I want to thank you," I began, "for hiking all the way out there."

THERE was a strange look in the wide blue-gray eyes. Absently she brushed back a strand of taffy-colored hair.

"Is there anything wrong?" I said sharply.

"There is lots wrong." Her voice was tense, strained. "Lots more than you can imagine. There's something evil, something unnatural going on. I know Pa's footsteps as well as I know my own and sometimes late at night I hear them going through the house, slow and steady. I'm scared, mister!"

She was scared. Her hand clutched my coat lapel.

"And yesterday"—she closed her eyes and shuddered—"yesterday near his chair I found a torn piece of his old denim work-shirt, the one he was wearing that day, all covered with brown, crusted stains."

"Take it easy," I said gently, and put my hand over the one holding my lapel.

"I'm sorry to bother you like this," she said, "but you seemed like someone I could talk to. I can't tell my step-brothers. They just look at each other and nod."

"Did you show them the piece of shirt?"

"I tried to. I mean, when I saw what it was, I dropped it on the floor and ran out to get them. When we came back it was gone. Oh, I wish Jim was here!"

I managed a confident smile and gave her hand a final pat.

"Quit worrying," I said, with a lot more assurance than I felt. "Before I leave your troubles will be over. And I don't mean in an asylum, either."

She gave me a pathetic little smile.

"Now," I said, "tell me where Joshua's workshop is."

"I can tell you, but it won't do you any



good. It's in the cellar and locked up tight. Nobody ever goes down there but him, and maybe Frank."

"I see."

"I've got to start supper now," she said quickly.

I followed her in and when I heard the sound of pots and pans out in back, I crossed the entry hall. Pa's rocker was behaving itself. There was a phone on the wall and the operator got me Silverstein's. It took a little time to get the word "*huarache*" over to Mr. Silverstein without raising my voice. At last he informed me that he never carried any such things, and that was that.

I cradled the receiver and listened. Emelie was still busy in the kitchen. I went into the parlor and stood beside Pa's rocker. The sunlight that slanted in through the window had changed from yellow to gamboge. The Goady cultivator was raising dust in the distance. For the moment Pa's chair was all mine.

I laid it on its back and looked it over carefully, especially the rockers. They were polished smooth from years of massaging the rug. There was not the smallest mark to indicate that they had been tampered with. The chair seemed normal in every respect.

For minutes I stood staring at it, while disquieting thoughts chased each other through my mind. The old room watched me in quiet amusement. The wise bird from the city who knew all the answers.

It was nearly dark when I switched on the light, with its home-made shade, that hung from a cord in the center of the ceiling. I was about to set the chair upright again when I noticed something. The tips of the rocker were not exactly the same color. One had a stained finish like the rest of the chair. The other had been painted to match the stain finish as nearly as possible. With a knife blade I scraped the paint off and found what I was looking for.

Somewhere in the back of the house a screen door slammed and the footsteps and voices of the brothers could be heard. I set the chair upright and as I did I gave it a good shake. There was a faint rapping sound. I smiled and made sure that the chair stood exactly as before.

When Frank and Joshua came in the parlor a little later, I was sitting on the sofa reading the paper.

"Well, Sherlock, how's the investigatin'?" the wit of the Goady family asked.

His forefinger was hooked through the handle of a half-gallon bottle. Frank carried some glasses.

"It's about washed up," I said. "I'll be leaving in the morning. Can you put me up for the night?"

The brothers looked at each other and then back at me. Frank's watchful eyes bored into mine.

"Quit stallin'," he said, harshly. "What's the verdict?"

"Well, I'm satisfied, boys."

Frank nodded solemnly. "Good!"

Joshua's smart little eyes seemed to hold some reservations, but he said:

"Swell! How about a snort or two before dinner? And he can stay here tonight, eh, Frank?"

"Sure."

We drank the raw grape brandy, a local product, out of water glasses. One swallow and you think the top of your head is coming off.

AFTER dinner I said I thought I would go out on the veranda for a smoke before turning in. Nobody offered to keep me company, for which I was grateful. I went out, leaving the door open but closing the screen behind me, and groped around in the dark until I found one of the hickory chairs I had noticed earlier in the day.

There was a warm breeze in from the desert that brought the smell of sage and mesquite. I stretched out my legs and got a cigarette burning. It was nice and restful out there, the only sound being the distant clatter of dinner dishes. Somewhere, miles away, a light bobbed along, disappearing for seconds to appear later further on. A car on the road to San Angelo.

High above, a plane droned briefly and went away. As the silence grew, a choir of crickets began tuning up. Then there was a rapid pad of feet on the steps and across the veranda toward me. In the darkness I made out a darker shape which proved to be Scratch. He stopped in front of me and dropped something at my feet. It fell with an unpleasant plop and I thought immediately of a gopher.

I got out my lighter and spun the wheel. Flame revealed the genial, panting mask of the dog with his red tongue lolling. At my feet lay a human hand!

For seconds my dinner struggled against the grape brandy. Whatever its defects as a beverage, it stood me in good stead now. I held the light closer. It was a brown hand, well crusted with soil. I looked at Scratch and he wagged his tail, quite pleased with himself.

I was sitting there trying to decide what to do when I heard Frank's step in the hall. Quickly I doused the light and with clenched teeth picked up the hand by one finger and tossed it over the rail. It had a cold, dry feeling. In a second I was out of the chair and over to the door.

I heard the rattle of the dog's claws on



the steps as he scampered down them. So I wanted to play, did I? He knew that run-and-fetch-it game. Casually I closed the screen door behind me.

"Getting a bit chilly outside," I said.

Chilly, heck! I was cold clear through!

Frank was coming toward me along the hall. He gave a contemptuous grunt in reply, a grunt that expressed his opinion of the ruggedness of city dwellers. I turned left into the parlor, trying not to hurry. He did not follow me in but strolled over to the screen door and stood there looking out into the darkness.

I heard the tap of the dog's claws on the porch now and again something was dropped, this time near the door.

"What you got now?" Frank said to Scratch through the screen.

He stood there a while longer, then slowly opened the screen and went out. I heard the scratching of a match, a muffled oath, then a yelp of surprise and pain from the dog. I picked up a magazine and became deeply interested.

Frank did not enter the house for some time. When he did, he stood in the doorway watching me for a long while.

"We go to bed kinda early out here, mister," he said softly.

"Huh?" I looked up, blinking. "Bed? Oh—okay."

"Your room's right at the top of the stairs. Emelie fixed it up and your bag's up there."

"Thanks!" I went over to the foot of the stairs. "Good night."

"It used to be Pa's room," Frank said.

### CHAPTER III

#### SPIRIT IN THE CHAIR



I LAY in the big brass bed staring at the darkness. The .32 Colt pistol I carried in my overnight bag was missing. The Goadys were not taking chances. By the faint glow of my wrist-watch it was five minutes of nine, but I had only heard Emelie's light step on the stairs.

I had been in bed about an hour, sorting and analyzing every creak and groan of the old house, when a series of stealthy sounds in the direction of the stairs drew my attention. They paused before my door, which had no key. As my heart began to pound I saw the edge of the dim rectangle move slightly inward.

I took that as a cue to breath deeply, audibly and regularly. I even managed a rather artistic hint of a snore. This went on for what seemed a century, then my door

closed again as silently as it had opened and the creaking receded on the stairs.

The floor was cold as I got out of bed. I put my feet in my shoes and wrapped a blanket around me. One window of the room faced to the side of the house and the other to the rear. It was from this rear window that I presently saw a man carrying a Coleman lantern start out across the fields. He had a shovel over his shoulder. The light went swaying off in a direction the opposite of which Emelie and I had walked that day.

Back in bed, I began to doze with a feeling of comparative security. In the morning, when the Goadys were out of the way, I would phone the Sheriff. My job would be finished and the Western States Indemnity would be saved a lot of dough. They ought to vote me a bonus. With this pleasant fantasy in mind I dropped off to sleep. . . .

It seemed as though I had hardly closed my eyes when I found myself wide awake and sitting bolt upright in bed. The room was noticeably colder and through the windows crept a faint gray light. I wondered for a moment what had aroused me, and then I knew. From below came the steady, unmistakable creak, creak, creak of Pa's rocker.

Why should it be rocking in the dead of night? The thing was pointless, unreasonable, and nearly impossible according to the way I had things figured out. Maybe I had figured wrong. It had happened before. If so, the alternative raised the hairs on the back of my neck. There is something about waking up in the middle of the night that makes everything take on its least promising aspect.

I pulled on my trousers and tucked in the tails of my pajama coat. My shoes were cakes of ice on my feet as I eased through the door and started down the stairs, keeping close against the wall. Step by step I crept down, the sound of the rocker growing ever more clear.

The stair well was in utter darkness, but in the parlor the faint gray of a false dawn came through the window beyond the chair. I strained my eyes in the dim light and finally made out what the chair held. A bearded head above a horribly jumbled shape that seemed jammed into the chair.

Back and forth it went with maddening regularity, a macabre, grotesque silhouette against the gray rectangle of window. The shadowy dimness, the cold, my own weariness and sense of deadly peril, all combined to make a terrifying impression on my sleep-drugged mind.

I do not know how many seconds I stood stiffly, with my back against the wall, before my attention was drawn by a flicker of white above me on the stairs. Someone was com-



ing down on the railing side. It was Emelie. She did not see me there motionless in the dark, for her whole attention was drawn toward the parlor.

She stopped at the foot of the stairs, so close I could have reached out and touched her. For a brief moment she stood, swaying, looking into the parlor. Then, scream after scream ripped through the old house.

I had to stop her. The sound rasped against my taunt nerves like a file. Regardless of consequences, my fingers fumbled along the wall for the light switch. There was a commotion at the head of the stairs and simultaneously the lights went on above and below.

Emelie's screams stopped and she looked at me dazedly as though I were a complete stranger. My eyes sought the chair in the parlor, now clear cut in the light from the hall. It was empty.

"What in thunder's goin' on down here?"

Frank and his brother were padding down the stairs, half-clad. Frank's eyes were bloodshot and both men reeked of brandy.

**I**T WAS Pa's spirit!" Emelie moaned. "I saw him sittin' there—sittin' rockin' in his chair!"

She hid her face in the crook of her arm and began to cry. Her taffy-colored hair was done up in pig-tails and that, with the long flannel nightgown, made her look like a lost child.

"She's loonier'n a barn owl," Joshua growled in disgust. "Next week we're gettin' them medicos out here to examine her."

"Yep." Frank nodded.

All at once they seemed aware of my presence. Both Goady brothers fixed me with a baleful glare.

"What about you?" Frank demanded. "I suppose you saw the old man's spook, too."

I opened my mouth to reply, then paused. I could sense that the question was not simply careless sarcasm. They were waiting warily, tensely, for what I was going to say.

Emelie lifted her tear-stained face and looked at me, too. The faces of the male Goadys would have been something to see if I had told them the truth. But the time was not yet.

"I heard Emelie's screams and hurried down," I began.

Joshua's face was more than ever like an angry boar's.

"All right, all right—you hurried down! Then what?"

I shrugged. "That's all. You turned on the lights and here we are."

"You didn't see nothin'?"

"Who are you trying to kid?" I snapped. "The chair's empty, isn't it?"

The disappointment in Emelie's eyes made

me look away. She believed that I, too, had failed her and her eyes began to fill.

"I did so see Pa's spirit!" she sobbed. "I ain't crazy!"

Frank turned on her furiously. "Shut up and quit that blubberin'!"

His hand closed on her hair. He jerked her face up and gave her the back and palm of his hand, hard.

"Take it easy, you!" My throat had tightened up and the words came out with a rasp.

Frank let go of her and looked at me. His lip curled.

"Come on, Frank," Joshua said, tugging at his brother's arm. "Go to bed. . . ."

It was nine o'clock when I awakened. The fog had come in again, making the world outside my windows a total blank. I dressed, warming myself with the thought that in a couple of hours or less I would fix the Goady brothers' wagon—but good!

On the shelf in the closet where I had hung my clothes, was a cardboard box half full of ten-gauge shotgun shells. I closed my fist around one of them. It was hard and the charge of buckshot gave it a little weight. A poor weapon—not as good as a roll of nickels, but better than nothing. I put it in my pocket.

Emelie, with red eyes and averted face, gave me my breakfast. She did not want to talk. The brothers were nowhere in sight, so I asked after them.

"Out workin', I guess," Emelie said indifferently.

When I was through, I waited for her to clear the table and go back to the kitchen. Then I went to the phone in the hall. The house was quiet. Somewhere outside, a plane was practising acrobatics. Its motor would roar as though it were coming down the chimney. Then it would throttle down and fade away, only to come droning back a minute later.

I got the San Angelo operator and asked for the Sheriff's office. There was a lot of buzzing and clicking and finally a muffled voice answered. I asked for Sheriff Coombs and the voice said he was out for a few minutes, but this was one of his deputies.

I told the deputy who I was and where I was. I told him to get hold of Coombs at once and hightail over here with a warrant for the Goady brothers. I said I would prefer charges of murder and had full evidence to back it up. The deputy's voice went up three tones as he said he would take care of it. We hung up.

While I was talking, I had a feeling that something was not quite right, but I could not put my finger on it at the moment. After I placed the receiver on the hook, the truth suddenly caught me between the eyes like a pitched ball. It had the same stunning effect and my first impulse was to bolt the



house like the devil was on my heels.

I realized, then, that while I had been talking over the phone I had heard the plane above the house giving off its varied sounds and that I had also heard the identical sounds over the receiver. I had not talked to San Angelo at all after my initial request had been given the operator. Someone in the house had cut in on the line, switched off the outside call and pretended to be the deputy. By this time the Goadys would have both exits covered.

**A** STEP in the hall made me jump. It was Emelie, all dressed up in light blue slacks with a jacket to match.

"Going out, Miss Goady?" I asked.

"Over to Jim Steven's place," she said coldly. "What's it to you?"

"Look, Emelie," I began urgently, "I saw your—well, your pa's spirit last night just as you did, but I couldn't tell your step-brothers just then. It would have been dangerous for both of us."

"I don't see why." Her head was still high but she sounded interested.

"Of course ~~you~~ don't, and there isn't time to explain now. You've got to trust me and everything will work out." As I talked I was scribbling in my note-book. "Here"—I tore out the sheet and handed it to her—"have Jim's father phone the Sheriff the minute you get there. Give this to him and no one else. Will you do that—and hurry?"

She read the words I had written and her face paled and drew into tight lines.

"Is this true, really?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"Yes, yes, I'll hurry!"

She closed the front door behind her and I heard her heels tapping across the veranda and down the steps. Good girl!

## CHAPTER IV

### TEN-GAUGE FURY



**G**OING through the house, I went out the back door. The fog reached for my face with its cold, clammy fingers.

The outside entrance to the cellar was about six feet below ground level and reached by half a dozen rather steep steps. Frank Goady sat on the top step watching the kitchen door.

He wore a scuffed leather jacket and held a double-barreled shotgun across his knees. He got slowly to his feet and moved toward me with a bleak face. The mists that swirled about him were no colder than his eyes.

"You was pretty slick, Mr. Investigator," he said, "but not slick enough."

"That was just what I was going to say to you, Goady," I replied.

"So, you think you got somethin' on us?"

"While we are waiting for the Sheriff, I will give you a rough idea," I said carelessly.

"Go ahead, but stay right where you are."

He shifted the shotgun suggestively.

"What made me really suspicious was the fact that there was so little left of the body after the so-called accident. Dynamite does not act that way, especially the low grade you use for blasting stumps. You need a more powerful explosive to blow a man completely to fragments."

"You killed your itinerant Mexican hand because he was without relatives or friends in this country who might check on him. You dressed him in your father's clothing and arranged the explosion. Most of the remains you buried on another part of the farm, leaving only unidentifiable bits for the coroner to find. It was a mistake for Joshua to keep the poor fellow's *huaraches*. I also found some strands of straight black hair that you overlooked. How'm I doing?"

"Right smart," Frank admitted gruffly. He took a match from his pocket and began chewing the end thoughtfully.

"What really cinched matters," I continued, "was when Scratch dropped a little souvenir at my feet last night. He fetched it back for you and got a kick in the ribs for his trouble. Later, one of you boys went out to switch the burial place. I didn't envy him his job. I know the direction, though, so the Sheriff won't have much trouble in finding it."

"What's this about the Sheriff?" Joshua said as he came around the corner of the house. "You ain't aimin' to set the law on us, Mr. McPhie?" He winked broadly at his brother. "We're just a couple of poor country boys trying to get along."

Frank spat out a piece of match and grinned. "He's been telling me all about it, Josh. Pretty good, too."

"Your father's been hiding out in the cellar," I went on. "He couldn't sleep well last night. Maybe he had things on his mind—things like murder. Anyway, he got lonesome for his rocker. He had to come up and sit and rock a while. You weren't counting on that, were you? Emelie saw him, and so did I."

"Your step-sister wasn't in on the scheme because you knew she'd never stand for it. So you tried to drive her crazy with your nasty little tricks, hoping to have her confined so you wouldn't have to share any of the insurance money you thought you would get. After that it would have been easy enough to smuggle the old man out of the state in a trailer."



No actor ever had a more attentive audience. They stood like fog-shrouded statues and Joshua was no longer smiling.

"That rocking chair gag," I concluded, "almost had me going. It held up fine until I found the metal rod in the front of one rocker. I suppose Joshua gets the credit for that one. An electro-magnet, under the flooring, operated from the cellar, made it rock like the devil himself was sitting there. Have I covered the ground?"

Frank Goady shifted the match to the other side of his face. "So well," he said dryly, "it plumb looks like we are going to have to have another accident."

"That won't buy you anything, boys. The Sheriff will be along any minute and he'd better find me all in one piece."

The brothers exchanged grins, so I went on.

"And I'm not counting on that phone call this morning, either. I know it never got outside of this house. Emelie was nice enough to take a message to Mr. Stevens, so you may as well relax."

Frank's jaw sagged. The match hung for a moment on his lip and then fell unheeded. He turned suddenly to his brother.

"Josh, is he lying? Has Emelie gone?"

**JOSHUA'S** round face was placid. He seemed to be enjoying himself, but he did not look at his brother. His little smart pig eyes were fixed on my face.

"Not far, Frank, not far. I heard 'em talkin' in the house when I came around the front. I couldn't hear what they said, so I kinda inquired of Emelie when she came out. She wouldn't say much but I got this note." He produced a slip of paper. "Had to twist her arm some to get that."

"What did you do with her?" Frank said.

"Tied up in this feller's car." Joshua handed my note to his brother. "What kind of accident you fixin' for him to have?"

The fog was getting noticeably colder. It seemed to be inside of me now.

"A huntin' accident," Frank explained judicially. "You see, Mr. McPhie has gone out lookin' for cottontails with Pa's old ten-gauge. He's walkin' along through the brush, carryin' the gun by the barrel, when a twig catches on the trigger. B-A-A-M! Too bad—poor feller should have known better. Then we get the Sheriff over pronto. And the coroner. Like it, Josh?"

"It's perfect! Sort of thing you'd expect a feller from the city to do."

"All right. Go get Pa's gun and some shells and we'll take him up beyond the north pasture. There won't be any witnesses in this fog, either. Just like the morning we blew up the Mexican."

We stood waiting for Joshua to return.

The palms of my hands were sweaty and I had a numb feeling of unreality. Frank stood, watchful and well out of reach, with the double-barreled gun cocked and ready.

Too soon came the crunch of Joshua's boots. "If you're sure it ain't loaded," Frank said, "let him carry it up there. I want his fingerprints on it."

Joshua held the gun out to me.

"Go to the devil!" I said.

Joshua looked at Frank and Frank shrugged. "I can blast him right here and put the prints on afterward."

I extended a shaky hand. "I'll take it," I said.

I could hardly recognize my voice. A man will do anything to extend life, if only for a few minutes.

Wordlessly we tramped through the fog. Across the lush green of the pasture and into the dry waste of mesquite and manzanita. The brothers' footsteps were close behind me, and I went on like the last man in a dead world with death close on his heels. High above, training planes droned again but I hardly heard them.

My hands were so cold I put the gun under my arm and thrust them in my coat pockets. My right hand closed over something hard and round. The ten-gauge buck-shot shell from Pa's closet! A sudden desperate hope shook me out of the stupor of fear into which I had fallen. If only it wasn't too late! I took my right hand from my pocket with the shell in my fist.

"This is far enough," Frank's voice rang out harshly.

I stopped. The gun was in my left hand, held in front of me and my right thumb groped for the lever that would break the gun open for loading.

"Turn around!" Frank ordered.

Again terror gripped me. I could never load it facing them and get away with it. Slowly I turned. Then, from above, came a roaring rush of sound. A training plane was pulling out of a practise dive. For a second it seemed it was coming down on us, a sudden gray shape swooping over our heads.

We all ducked, the Goadys with angry faces turned upward. I jammed in the shell and snapped the breech shut. With the sound of the motors in their ears they never heard it.

"That fool will kill somebody!" Frank snarled. His eyes came down from the skies to me. "Well, Mr. Investigator, this is it!"

The double-barreled gun was raising slowly toward his shoulder.

"Put that down and fast!" My words came out in an almost hysterical scream. I held the ten-gauge at hip level.

"He's so scared he's gone loco," Joshua said, almost in awe.



"Yeah," Frank replied. His gun was almost to his shoulder now.

I braced myself and the ten-gauge roared in my hands, jumping like a live thing. There was flame and a roll of smoke through which I saw Frank crumple as though he had been hit by a giant's club. One barrel of his gun went off in the air and the gun clattered to the ground between us.

**F**OR a moment Joshua wavered, goggle-eyed, staring at me in utter disbelief. Then he dived for Frank's gun. I stepped forward and thrust the butt of the ten-gauge out and let him smash his face against it. One of his hands, clawing, closed over the stock on the ground. Down came the ten-gauge on his fingers, hard.

I picked up Frank's gun and prodded Joshua with the barrel. "Get up," I said. "I'm taking you in to town."

He got slowly to his feet, holding his crushed hand away from his body. For a moment he stood there, wiping the blood from his lips and looking down at Frank, then he staggered away into the fog.

There was a strange car in the yard when we got back. Two figures emerged from the whirling mists to meet us. The first was a squat, heavy-set man wearing a battered Stetson. An equally battered star was pinned to his gray flannel shirt.

"Hi, McPhie!" said the Sheriff of San Angelo. He caught sight of Joshua's bloody face and looked neither surprised nor displeased. "What in tarnation's goin' on?" he asked mildly.

The second figure was a big, husky kid wearing the field green of the Marine Corps. He was leaning on a cane and there were some bits of color across the left breast of his tunic. "Where's Emelie?" he said.

"How'd you happen along, Sheriff?" I asked, joining the quiz and getting ready my answer to the sixty-four-dollar question that was coming.

"Why, Jim Stevens just got home on a fur-

lough and as he was hankerin' to see Emelie right away, I ran him over."

"Where's Emelie?" said Jim Stevens patiently.

I ignored the question as there seemed to be more important matters on hand at the moment.

"Sheriff, you'd better take Goady in and get him patched up. I've got a murder charge all sewed up against him. Frank's dead—his body's up youder." I gave Coombs a quick outline of the facts.

"Where's Emelie?!" There was something in Steven's voice that indicated I was about to get the cane over my head.

"She's tied up in my car, out in front. Wait a minute!" I backed away hastily. "I didn't put her there!"

He made surprisingly good time around the corner of the house.

The Sheriff was leading Joshua to the car when my eye caught something moving by the cellar steps. A skinny old man with a tobacco-stained beard was walking uncertainly toward us. His watery eyes were squinting through the fog.

"It's Amos Goady!" bellowed Dan Coombs.

A look of childish terror crossed the old man's face. He turned and ran awkwardly back to the steps leading down to the cellar door. At the top he seemed to trip, for his arms flailed wildly and he went down head-first.

I reached him first. His head had struck the brick retaining wall and was twisted under him at a sickening angle. I turned him over carefully, but there was nothing anybody could do for him now.

Swearing softly, I climbed the steps. After all my work, Western States was still out twenty grand.

Coombs was at the top holding on to the bracelet he had put on Joshua's wrist.

"Is he dead?" he asked.

I nodded. "Looks like Emelie and Jim are going to have a nice stake to set up housekeeping with," I said.

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Before Raffner could get his wrist  
in firing position, Mac let him have  
a right hook to the jaw



# ON A STEEP SIDE STREET

By C. S. MONTANYE

*Detective McClain of Homicide does a neat bit of sleuthing  
when he pursues a gang of ruthless homicidal smugglers!*

**B**IG DAVE McCLAIN of the Homicide Department, got out of the prowler car that had brought him up to Washington Heights. It was raining; a thin, melancholy drizzle. McClain hated rain. He hated having to get out of bed at six in the morning. Most of all he hated people who went and got themselves murdered at such unorthodox hours. There should be a law against it.

Mac turned up the collar of his coat and scowled as he crossed the pavement to the areaway of the empty private house. It was on the corner of a steep street. Below, the

Drive, and the Hudson beyond, were desolate and chilly in the gray light of early morning.

A cop kept back a group of five or six curious spectators craning their necks to see what was in the areaway. Mac, shifting his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, nodded to the medical examiner and the two plainclothes men who stood with their hands in their pockets, looking bored.

"Shot through the back of the head, the M.E. said. "Probably with a thirty-eight. Dead about an hour." He snapped his bag shut.

Mac looked at the stiff. An ordinary chap



in a wet brown suit. Black shoes, blue shirt and striped tie. Man about twenty-eight or so. Sandy hair and a lumpy kind of face. Mac glanced at the death wound, then took a drag on his cigar.

"Get his prints when you take him down to the morgue," he grunted. He squinted up at the house. "What's the story?"

Wheeler, one of the plainclothes men, told him that a passer-by, happened to give the areaway a gander, saw the body and reported to the first cop he could find. There were no identifying papers on the body, nothing to give a clue as to who he was.

Mac snapped the brim of his felt hat to get rid of some of the rain.

"Shot and dumped here." His scowl deepened. "He looks kind of familiar. I've seen him before—somewhere. Get the wagon and give him a ride downtown. I'm going in next door."

Slouching out of the areaway, the detective went up some brown stone steps and rang the bell of the adjoining house. Neat curtains were behind spotless windows. He rang twice before the door opened and a little old lady with the whitest hair and the bluest eyes Mac had ever seen smiled up at him.

"McClain, Headquarters." He took off his hat—something he seldom did. "Mind if I come in? I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Certainly," the little woman said. "Come right in."

Mac looked at his cigar. It was only half smoked. He shrugged as he tossed it away, carefully wiped his feet on a mat and walked into the house.

The aromatic smell of coffee made Mac sniff. The little old lady opened the parlor door and ushered him in. Mac looked dubiously at the furniture and shook his head.

"Guess I'd better keep on my feet, ma'am. I'm pretty wet."

"So you are. And you'll probably catch your death of cold. You'd better take that coat off and sit down over there. I'll light the gas logs. I just know you'll enjoy a cup of coffee."

"Well," Mac said and grinned, "I've never been known to refuse one."

"You make yourself comfortable and I'll be right back."

She put a match to the gas logs and bustled out. Mac heard her talking with someone outside.

"What is it, Mother?"

"A gentleman who says he's from Headquarters. He wants to ask us some questions. He's awfully wet and I think he should have a cup of good hot coffee."

"I'll get it."

"No, you go in and talk to him, Pa. I'll only be a minute."

Portieres rustled and in came a rotund little man with apple-red cheeks, eyes that twinkled, and something McClain hadn't seen around for a long time. The man featured a snowy white beard.

"My name is Loring, Oscar Loring. You were talking to Mother—my wife. Is something the matter?"

He held out a pudgy, soft hand. Mac shook it and shrugged. Somehow the Loring reminded him of New England boiled dinners, apple pie and cider, hayrides and quiet green pastures. They certainly didn't belong on a steep side street in Washington Heights.

Mrs. Loring came in with a steaming cup of his favorite brew. Mac took it gratefully and then explained his mission.

"Murder?" the little old lady exclaimed. "How terrible! And right next door! Dear, dear, what is the world coming to?"

"I thought maybe you folks might have heard something," McClain hinted. "Car stopping, men talking—"

Oscar Loring shook his head. "Not a sound, sir. You see, our bedroom is in the rear, on the top floor. Besides," he smiled over at his wife, "we're rather heavy sleepers, Mother and I. Takes a lot to disturb us."

Mac put on his coat. "Thanks for the mocha. Sorry to have bothered you."

"You didn't." Mrs. Loring beamed again. "We're sorry we couldn't help you."

**M**AC hopped the prowler car and went back downtown.

A short time later Wheeler came in with the fingerprint report.

"Guess you had something when you said he looked familiar, Mac. Party by the name of Jed Connors. Ex-con. Six years in Sing Sing. Little matter of grand larceny. Connors swung the derrick on that Fifth Avenue diamond drag. Remember?"

"Yeah." McClain automatically reached in his upper vest pocket for a cigar. "You mean the deal Mickey Raffner was in on?"

Wheeler nodded. "This Connors used to be Raffner's right hand man."

"That's right," Mac said thoughtfully, fumbling for a match.

Wheeler went out and McClain sat down at his desk. He shoved his long legs out before him, puffed lazily on the cigar. As the department's number one weed killer, Mac's daily batting average for cigars led the nicotine league. He always said he couldn't think if he didn't have a stogie to chew on.

He thought about Mickey Raffner. Raffner had done his bit, too, for the Fifth Avenue hoist. But Raffner had reformed. The past couple of years Mickey had been around town, though out of circulation so far as his



former cronies and usual haunts were concerned. In fact, Mac remembered, someone had told him that Raffner was holding down a job behind the newspaper-cigar counter in one of the Broadway hotels.

From where he sat, the Connors kill looked like a misfit to the big detectives. One of those things that didn't mean too much. One rat had bumped another rat. So what? Probably a settle-up on an old grudge or something. Just another one of those things.

Mac yawned. Six o'clock in the morning, piling out of the hay. It wasn't human. Particularly after he had turned in at two that morning. He had been playing gin rummy in the squad room and his knuckles were sore from knocking. He thought of the Lornings' coffee and sighed. His favorite diner would have to do better in the future if they expected his patronage.

One of the Headquarters cops opened the door and stuck his head in.

"Busy, Mac? There's a fellow here who knows something about the Washington Heights smear. Want to talk to him?"

The man who came in wore a taxi hackie's cap. He was about five feet two, looked metropolitan, smart. McClain got up and shut the office door.

"What's yours, buddy?"

"My name's Heller, Herb Heller. I drive for the Blue Cab outfit, I had a funny one this morning. It's stuck in my mind ever since."

"Have a chair." The detective pushed one over with his foot. "Unload."

"It was about ten after five." Heller rubbed his chin. "I had a call at One Hundred and Fiftieth and Broadway. After I dropped my fare I cruised a few streets. Then I hit for the Drive, through a west-bound street."

"What's unusual about that?" Mac yawned again.

"Near a private house on a corner, a party hailed me. He hopped in—fast. Told me to take him to an address on Ninety-first Street, near Columbus. I let him off there. Rooming house."

Mac began to register more interest.

"You picked this party up near the house where the stiff was found in the areaway? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Right. I just read about it in the paper and thought I ought to tell somebody. On account," Heller added, "of something else happening."

McClain frowned over at him. He flicked the ash from his cigar.

"Yeah? What else?"

"My ark was tailed down to Ninety-first Street. I didn't say nothing to my passenger, but a black coupe followed us all the way."

"Think you'd know the man you rode down?" McClain asked.

"Sure. I had a good look at him when he put on the light to pay the meter. He didn't get out because it was raining. I'd know him."

"Then, let's take a roll up to Ninety-first and see what we can pick up. Got your cab handy?"

"Right at the curb."

THE rooming house, Mac saw, was typical of its kind. A furrier occupied the basement. The first floor was given over to a hemstitching and initialing shop. McClain went in, Heller following. He asked information and in a few minutes the landlady appeared.

A buxom woman, faded and worn, Mac imagined that in her youthful days she might have carried a spear in some burlesque troupe. He gave her straw-colored hair an interested glance.

"Police business, lady," he said. "This man will give you a description. If it fits any of your roomers let me know. Okay, Heller. Spin it out."

The taxi driver supplied an exact description of his early morning fare. Before he had finished the woman nodded.

"That's Mr. Robinson. Second floor rear. But I'm sure he ain't the type to be in trouble. He works up on the Heights—he's a clerk in an all-night drugstore. He's in now, if you want to see him."

Mac told Heller to go back to his cab and wait. He lit a fresh cigar and followed the landlady up the stairs. With every step she wheezed like a broken accordion.

"Funny thing—you asking about Mr. Robinson," the woman was saying. "Just a little while after he came in another detective stopped here wanting to see him. He didn't stay long."

"Yeah?" Mac frowned.

The woman stopped before the last door on the right.

"Mr. Robinson," she called, knocking on the door. "Somebody to see you, Mr. Robinson."

There was no answer. McClain brushed by the woman and tried the door. It was unlocked. He opened it, walked in and came to a quick stop.

Half across the bed, still fully dressed, Heller's passenger lay in a pool of blood. But he wasn't dead. His eyes were half open and he was trying to say something. Mac was over in a stride.

"Claws—"

The man repeated the one word again, slowly, gasping it out almost inaudibly. McClain swung around to the landlady. She had had an oblique view of her roomer over Mac's shoulder and was backing away quickly, her none-too-clean apron crushed



to her trembling mouth.

"Where's your telephone?" McClain asked abruptly. . . .

At ten to five that afternoon Dave McClain was in the office of Captain Fred Mullin, head of Homicide.

"Robinson passed his checks in at the General Hospital twenty minutes ago," Mullin said.

"Any statement?" Mac wanted to know.

"He was unconscious from the time they took him out of the rooming house until he went skyward. What have you got on the Connors thing?"

"Not a heck of a lot," Mac admitted. "I'm checking on Raffner. There's just a chance he might know something. These prison birds flock around together. And you know what the jewelry gift is to-day, diamonds being as scarce as porterhouse and bringing top prices. I figure that maybe Raffner and Connors were back at the grind again."

Mullin's pale, humorless eyes fastened coldly on McClain.

"No facts. Just a hunch, in other words?"

"In other words—yes."

Mullin's smile was ironic. "You're all hopped up with cigar poisoning, Mac. Your mind's in a fog. Go out and get some fresh air—and come back with something concrete that'll stand up. Such as," Mullin suggested, "the party who bumped the slug into Jed Connor's topknot—and the one who sapped Robinson into a better world."

"I'll do that, Chief."

McClain got up, stretched and reached for his hat. It had dried since the morning's rain, but there was a roguish curl to the brim that no amount of smoothing out could do away with. McClain put it on and steered his big feet toward the door.

The word the unfortunate Robinson had gasped, stuck like a burr in the big detective's thoughts. Claws? What did it mean, what was its significance? Though he sounded incoherent, Mac had a pretty good idea Robinson's mind was rational when he choked the word out. Robinson was trying to give him a clue, give him the tip-off. . . Well, that was one for the book.

The air had become a lot colder after the rain. Mac stopped at the diner, a couple of streets up Lafayette. His cup of coffee tasted like old box tops and chicory. He suddenly recalled the Lorings' spic and span parlor, the agreeable warmth of the gas logs and the smooth, gratifying flavor of the coffee the little old lady had brought him.

The lids went down over Mac's eyes. His fingers drummed nervously on the greasy counter. Deep in thought, he sat without moving until the counterman loomed up in front of him.

"Looks like rain, Mac."

"Yeah. And tastes like it." McClain pushed his cup aside and dropped a dime down on the counter. "Sometime, when you think of it, try making it out of coffee."

Taking the subway as far as Times Square, McClain walked one block and turned east away from the swirling neons, the crowds and the confusion of traffic. That brought him to the Hotel Rosemont. Entering the lobby, he sat down in a corner and looked around with some curiosity. Finally his wandering gaze focused on the newspaper-cigar counter and the man in charge.

Mickey Raffner hadn't changed much. Tall, thin, saturnine, the former guest of the State had a natty appearance. As Raffner knew him, McClain was careful to be unobserved. He didn't want the man to know he was watching him.

FIFTEEN or twenty minutes passed before Mac got a break. Then a round-shouldered youth in a camel's hair coat came in from the street. He wore a green felt hat slanted over his thin face. For decoration, a cigarette was in one corner of his mouth, a bright red muffler around his neck. He carried a folded newspaper under his arm and headed for the cigar counter.

McClain raised a Barrymore eyebrow. The party in the green hat was Tod Sterling, but unlike his name, this lad was pure alloy.

Around the main boulevard Sterling had a reputation for being a crook's errand boy. A small-time grifter who played for pennies, he had been arrested several times but discharged for lack of evidence. McClain knew Tod Sterling from a couple of cases he had handled. The man was a rat, a punk.

Sterling rested an elbow on the cigar counter. Raffner let him dangle there for a couple of minutes. Then he walked over to him. Sterling slipped the newspaper in his pocket and said something, the cigarette bobbing in his mouth as he spoke.

Raffner bent over and evidently opened a closet into the counter. He came up with a cigar box.

Raffner didn't open the box and to McClain that was the tip-off. Instead, Raffner got a piece of paper and wrapped it up. Sterling didn't bother to produce any money. He put the box under his arm, lingered for a little more gab and then walked off.

When Sterling went out of the Rosemont, Mac had already chartered a taxi, to use if necessary, and was waiting. Sterling turned toward Sixth Avenue.

"Drift along after me," Mac told his hackie. "I'll peg this lug on foot."

Sterling crossed the street and walked into a parking lot. That was all McClain wanted. The big detective climbed into his taxi.



"Park here until he comes out. Then stay with him."

It wasn't long before Sterling, driving a black coupe, rolled out to the street. With a grunt of satisfaction Mac reached for a fresh cigar and settled back on the worn upholstery. From here on in it was strictly his driver's job.

The coupe threaded through side streets, crossed Longacre and continued on to the ramp entrance that led to the river-front express highway. Mac's taxi chugged along in its wake, the driver taking his bearings from the coupe's tail-light. There must have been a loose connection because, Mac saw the light winking at them like a sly, evil eye.

There wasn't much traffic when the highway merged with Riverside Drive at 72nd Street. If Tod Sterling figured he had a shadow on him he gave no evidence of the fact. He kept going in a straight line at the same speed. After awhile Mac saw where he was. He nodded, not greatly surprised to find himself on the same steep side street where, that morning in the rain, he had given Samuel Stiff a gander in the areaway.

Sterling parked the coupe on Broadway and went down the street as far as the deserted house on the corner below. McClain scribbled something on the back of an envelope and handed it to his driver—with instructions. Then he dropped off and, in the gloom beyond the street lights, watched Sterling duck into the areaway of the empty house.

The basement's iron-grille gate was shut. But it didn't need a Houdini to open it. Mac slipped a hand through one of the squares in the grille, drew the lock back and let the gate swing in. He had good luck with the half-wood-half-glass door under the stoop, too. Sterling had pushed it shut after him, but the latch hadn't caught.

Mac crossed the threshold and melted into darkness so thick it could have been cut with blunt scissors. The musty smell of long desertion was no Channel No. 5 to his nostrils. He listened until he heard faint footsteps upstairs.

Following on, his fingers brushing a plaster wall to guide him, Mac came to the stairs.

He stopped at the head of them. Not a dozen yards away he was in time to see a door open, admitting a yellow gush of light. The door closed, voices sounded on the other side of it. Again Mac used the raised brow, lifting his big, flat feet until he was on tip-toe. Like a ballet dancer he steered his brogans toward the door. The voice were dying away on the other side of it. Smiling a little, McClain wound his fingers around the knob and—pulled.

On well-oiled hinges, the door opened so quickly and easily it almost threw him off balance. He blinked like an owl with eyes full of sunshine, as he stared into the same spic and span parlor where the gas logs had given out their agreeable heat that morning. The same setting where he had gargled the welcome java!

Mac stepped into the room, closing the door noiselessly behind him. He was giving his surroundings a second and more complete gander when, to the right of him, Tod Sterling's disagreeable voice spoke quietly.

"All right, copper! Stop where you are and start pointing at the ceiling—with both hands!"

A BUSINESSLIKE automatic, with its working end beaded on McClain, got immediate service. Mac reached. Sterling came around and took his police gun from its leather holster. He shoved it in the pocket of his camel's hair coat and grinned crookedly.

"Sit down, copper."

Mac took the same end of the sofa he sat in that morning.

"Graduated?" he asked matter-of-factly. "Real important now. Hold people up and everything."

The door opened and Oscar Loring came in. The apple-checked man with the white waterfall beard let his twinkling eyes play over McClain.

"What a coincidence," he said, almost jovially. "The same gentleman who stopped in this morning. And Mother doesn't have the percolator on now."

"Keep him covered." Sterling handed Loring the automatic. "I've got to telephone. Blast him if he makes a move. I know this monkey. He's one of Mullin's gang. His name is McClain and he's dynamite."

Loring made a clucking sound with his pursed lips.

"Dear, dear. Dynamite? Sounds dreadful."

"I'll buzz Mickey," Sterling said and left the room hurriedly.

Mac looked at the benevolent little man facing him.

"Bad business, Mr. Loring. Maybe you've heard—the law always wins. Chuck that shooter away and I'll see that they go easy on you."

Oscar Loring chuckled. "A nice sense of humor, young man. 'Chuck the gun away'? Don't be ridiculous—in a very short time we'll be using it on you."

Mac nodded. "A double-header. Connors this morning and me tonight. A perfect score. What did Jed do—try to cross you up?"

"Poor, foolish Jed." Loring sighed. "He thought he could get away with his own



ideas. Such a stupid boy!"

He was about to add something else when the door opened and Sterling came back.

"Mickey's on his way. He says to wait until he gets here."

Loring returned the automatic to Sterling. The latter was out of the camel's hair coat now, but stuck to the green hat. His eyes, blank and expressionless like all of his stripe, evaded McClain's direct glance.

"How much does he know, Oscar? I heard you two talking."

"I know enough to put you on sparks," Mac drawled, taking a cigar from his vest-pocket humidor. "Mind if I smoke? Don't say you don't care if I burn. That privilege is reserved for you—on a murder rap!"

"Oh, you're entirely incorrect," Oscar Loring cut in briskly. "Tod didn't shoot Jed. I did that."

He smiled reassuringly at Sterling, rubbing his pudgy hands gently together. McClain stared. A case for a straight jacket and a laughing academy, he decided.

"Close your yap!" Sterling rasped. "Don't be telling this dick anything!"

McClain leaned comfortably back, crossing one leg over the other. He puffed the cigar into a glowing tip and shifted it from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Same old racket—stolen jewels. Diamonds, probably. The market's high on them. I suppose Loring breaks them up, re-cuts and re-sets them. Mickey Raffner's the receiver at his counter in the Rosemont. Dove-tails nicely. And Loring bumped Connors—when Jed got greedy or something."

The little man with the rosy cheeks gave Mac an admiring glance.

"Dear, dear. He's a regular Sherlock Holmes, isn't he, Tod? The way he figures things out, it's remarkable."

"Wait a minute," McClain straightened. Sterling's gun hand moved an inch forward. "Robinson, through for the night and going home, must have seen you boys easing Connors out into the areaway of the house next door. He must have got a close-up view before he ducked—grabbing a cab. Raffner must have followed him down to his boarding house. Raffner put the finishing touches on him there."

"Amazing!" the little man murmured.

"Connors' body wasn't supposed to have remained permanently in the areaway," Mac said, as if to himself. "It was to be transferred to the black coupe and dumped somewhere. But Robinson, getting a preview of the act, spoiled it. And then, before Raffner could come back and play undertaker, a nosey passerby had lamped the corpse. It fits right down to the last word Robinson managed to deliver when I found him in his room."

LORING'S twinkling eyes moved from Sterling back to the big detective on the sofa.

"Indeed? And what word was that?"

"Claws!" Mac grinned faintly. "Funny, I couldn't figure it—white beard and all—at first. The whiskers must have stuck in Robinson's mind, together with the merry eyes and the apple cheeks. Not to mention the pot under your belt, pal. Robinson was trying to say 'Santa Claus!'"

"Once," Loring admitted, "I took a department store position at holiday time to play Kris Kringle. The children adored me and I will always remember—"

"Quiet!" Sterling interrupted. "Car's stopping! Take a peek, Oscar."

"Mickey," Loring told him, parting the crisp curtains cautiously. "Mother," he called from the doorway, "Would it be too much trouble to let Mickey in?"

Mac tensed himself as Raffner came into the room. The former convict was heavier caliber than Sterling. Raffner had brains, was plenty tough. And Raffner knew that when he tangled with the law he had to act fast and make it good.

"Dave McClain," Raffner's forehead corrugated into thought wrinkles. "I don't like it."

"What's the odds?" Sterling spoke carelessly. "Put a slug in him and drop him in the river."

The plump Loring massaged his double chins with his pink fingers.

"I think that's an excellent suggestion," he said happily. "If we took him down in the basement next door, Mother wouldn't hear the shot. It's ridiculous, of course, but she can't stand the sound of a gun going off."

"No, wait!" Raffner pulled his neck into his collar. "If this dick knows enough to edge in here, he might have a throwback to the Department. He's not a dope. If he moved in there's a big chance that he's passed the word."

"Sent it—special delivery—on the back of an envelope by a taxi driver," Mac informed them. "I told him to phone it in to headquarters for me." He looked from one to the other. "They ought to be around any minute now."

"Okay!" Raffner ripped it out. "Knock him off and let's get the heck out in a hurry!"

"I took the precaution of asking Mother to pack the three valises," Loring said. "I'll see if she's ready. You know women," he added, over his shoulder, as he streaked for the door.

"One shot—through the heart!" Raffner husked, as the door closed behind Loring.

McClain came to life as if touched with



a live wire. He saw the automatic in Tod Sterling's hand slide up to cardiac range. Before Sterling could squeeze the trigger, Mac was up and off the sofa like a flash of light.

He ducked left, spinning around as the automatic roared. The slug came so close it burned through the sleeve of Mac's coat. Raffner was tugging for his own artillery as Mac's oversized fist crashed into Sterling's face.

The big dick felt muscle and cartilage bend under the impact of the blow. Sterling let go of his rod and collided with Raffner. The backward stumble spoiled Raffner's aim. Before he could get his pistol wrist in firing position again, Mac let him have a right hook to the jaw that jolted the ex-con's bridgework.

Whimpering, Sterling, meanwhile, was feeling around the floor for the automatic he had dropped. Mac slammed his pavement-worn shoe into Sterling's stomach and waded up to finish Mickey Raffner.

There was nothing McClain liked more than a bare knuckle brawl. The police gym kept him at the peak of physical perfection. He had all the assets necessary for the prize or wrestling ring—plus the hot-headed impetuosity of good old Erin, handed down through generations of shilalah-swinging ancestors.

Mac grabbed Raffner, hauled him to him and was about to curtain-sock him when

he saw the door open and Loring came in. In the white bearded man's hand was a Luger, large and formidable.

McClain did the only thing possible. He used Raffner as a shield while he twisted the man's snub-nosed gat out of his hand. The chill of its cold steel in Mac's fingers felt like money from home. He did some fancy snap-shooting, angling two shots from around his shield's right arm.

Either one would have sufficed.

The first bullet caught Loring a couple of inches above the wrist. The second thudded into the little man's shoulder. With a scream of pain Loring lost interest in the proceedings while, from the hall, through the echoes of the twin shots, the woman who had made McClain think of New England boiled dinners and quiet, pastoral scenes, looked in.

"Pa! Pa, what's happened?"

But Mac didn't pay any attention to her apprehensive query. Out on the steep street his quick ears heard the familiar whine of a police prowler's siren.

Mullin and reinforcements from Headquarters!

Mac dropped down on the sofa, blowing on his knuckles. He switched his gaze from the twitching Sterling on the floor to the cowering Raffner, and then up at the little old lady on the threshold.

"Let the cops in, Mother," he requested. "And then be a dear, and put on a big pot of coffee for all of us. I need it!"

*Johnny Castle tackles the mystery surrounding the sudden death of  
Big Mike Cardigan, gambling mogul, in*

## IT COMES UP MURDER

By C. S. MONTANYE

NEXT MONTH

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE

\* **F-N TEST?**



\*The Famous  
Finger Nail Test

1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.

YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK  
LIKE THIS WITH NEW

**WILDROOT  
CREAM-OIL**

2 Keeps hair well combed all day without that greasy look! Grooms without grease! Relieves dryness, removes loose ugly dandruff. Your hair looks good and feels good.



NON-ALCOHOLIC  
CONTAINS REFINED  
**LANOLIN!**

3 Refined LANOLIN is a soothing oil that closely resembles the oil of the human skin. Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or druggist.







Swiftly, Marian dialed the operator to call the police

# LEAD FOR THE EDITOR

By SAM MERWIN, Jr.

*A keen-witted secretary helps to solve a mystery!*

MARIAN sat patiently by her typewriter just in front of Tod Whelton's desk while he belabored his managing editor over the telephone. She had learned to be patient with Tod, though her long forbearance was drawing close to the snapping point.

"What kind of a managing editor are you, McBride?" the editor of the *New World News* shouted into the phone. "Here we have a major public enemy holed-up in this city for over a month, and you can only dig up dog stories and divorces! Do you think

that's what I'm paying you a hundred and a half a week for—dog stories?"

He hung onto the phone, tapping the desk-top with his fingers, while the harried man on the other end of the line in the city room, dimly seen through the pebbled glass partition, had his say.

"I know the police haven't found him," Tod said again, his voice sounding as tired as Methuselah's. "Nobody expects the police in this city to find anything. But in a town of only sixty thousand people, you ought at least to get a line on Gunner Smith's



moll. A hot potato like that can't be walking around here without at least drawing whistles. She's a brunette knockout."

He slammed the phone down hard in its cradle, buried his head in his hands. He spoke, as much to himself as to Marian, without lifting his head.

"It's enough to drive a man crazy," he said. "Here we have a cold-blooded murder and robbery committed in broad daylight. Fifteen witnesses saw Gunner Smith come out of Mrs. Parker's house with the loot in his hand. They saw Loretta Mann waiting for him at the wheel of the car. And all anyone has been able to find in almost five weeks is the car. Where in blazes did they go to? The earth didn't swallow them up."

"How about checking up in your own front yard?" Marian said quietly.

She nodded toward the automatic pistol which rested on Tod Whelton's desk. Tod hefted it, looked at her pityingly. At times like this she felt like grabbing him by the hair with both hands and sinking her teeth in the end of his nose. She loved him that much.

"I almost forgot," he said, his expression becoming stern and very much that of the dynamic young editor of the *New World News*. "You've got a bawling-out coming to you, and you're going to get it."

"I quit," said Marian, picking up her pocketbook and rising. "You can have the paymaster send my check around to the apartment."

"Wait a minute, please, Marian," said Tod, going soft and pleading. "Don't you go temperamental on me now. You can't quit."

"Oh, yes I can," said the girl defiantly. "I'm fed to the teeth with taking your bawling-out every time I try to show you a girl is making a sucker out of you. Next to your apologies when you find out I'm right, I hate them worst. And when have I been wrong?"

"All right, all right," said the editor gently. "But this time you are. Just because you found a pistol in Jean Wales' handbag doesn't make her Loretta Mann. And furthermore, you had no right to steal it. Maybe the poor kid is in danger of some kind."

"Then why hasn't she a permit?" snapped Marian. "And don't say I'm guessing. I checked with Police Headquarters."

**T**OD ran thick, but well-shaped fingers through his hair.

"But Loretta Mann is a brunette," he said. "I just can't see it, that's all."

"Heck, I touch up my hair myself—to look young, and beautiful and spirituelle," said the girl. "Now try and forget that you're crazy about the girl and use some sense."

Didn't she come to work here the day after the robbery? Didn't you take her on on the strength of a hip-wiggle and a couple of rolling eyes? Did you check up on whatever references she gave you?"

"N—no," he confessed, "but I didn't have to. The girl's smart. She's a topnotch reporter. I couldn't afford not to take her on these days."

"Anyway, she's smarter than you," Marian said unkindly.

She wasn't exactly in a charitable mood. If she'd had the brains of a nanny goat, she would have quit when she had the chance. She would be fired in a couple of minutes anyway, when the next edition came off the presses.

"Besides," she went on, deciding to go whole hog while she was at it, "don't tell me those garters with the diamond clasps initiated RNP stand for Jean Wales."

"They don't stand for Loretta Mann either," snapped Tod. He blushed slowly but enthusiastically under the girl's accusing regard as he realized what a slip he had made.

"But they could stand for Rita Norris Parker," Marian reminded sweetly. "And there were a pair of snappers like that listed in the loot Gunner Smith stole from the Parker home after he murdered Rita."

"They stand for Robert N. Phillips, a boy Jean was engaged to!" snapped Tod. "He wanted her to wear his initials close to her—"

"For two years I've had to sit here and see you taken for a ride by every hunk of woman who didn't have a wooden leg," said Marian flatly. "I covered up for you and put the pieces together after you fell for a carnival queen, a showgirl with experiences to sell—and what experiences!—a school of journalism graduate with libel in her soul, and a widow trying to put her sons through school on the blackmail information she could wheedle out of you. But playing second fiddle to a gun moll is too much."

"Jean isn't a gun moll," Tod stubbornly insisted.

"And I suppose that isn't a gun," said Marian. She stood up again. "Look at me, you goon," she demanded. "Take a good look. What's the matter with me? I've got good legs and a better figure than most of your zany crushes. I've got a good face, even if it doesn't photograph well. I even know how to cook."

"Why, Marian!" said Tod, a new light rising in his eyes. "I didn't know you cared. I thought you existed only to stick the needle into me. Not, I confess, that I don't need it occasionally, but—"

At that moment, Tony, the office boy, came



in with a half-dozen copies of the city edition and slapped them on Tod's desk. Marian, feeling suddenly weak in the knees, sat down again and waited for the explosion. This was it.

It didn't come at once. Tod looked over the headline, which said in big block letters:

#### MURDERER AT LARGE

Tod grunted, scanned the rest of the page before his eyes came to rest on the fudge-box right under the banner head, atop the rest of the Gunner Smith story. Marian could see the fudge-box before her without closing her eyes. It read:

FLASH! FLASH! FLASH!

NEW WORLD NEWS LOCATES  
GUNNER SMITH'S HIDE-OUT!

Two minutes before going to press, it was learned on a reliable exclusive tip that the notorious "Gunner" Smith, wanted for the murder of Mrs. Rita Norris Parker of this city, is hiding out in the apartment of his traveling companion, Loretta Mann, at 1412 West Oak Street in this city. Loretta, wearing a disguise, has been walking the streets openly as a working girl and holding down a job till things cooled off. Police take notice!

Marian ought to know what it said. She had put it into the paper herself, using Tod as her authority. At the time, she had believed it pretty clever, especially that bit about Loretta walking the streets. Now she knew only the sinking, horrible fear that she might have been wrong. If, by any chance—and there were plenty of chances, about a million of them—that Jean Wales was not Loretta Mann, Tod might as well leave town. He would be in for a million-dollar libel suit.

When no sound came, she risked a glance at him. Tod just sat there staring at it. When, at last, his eyes did lift to hers and read the guilt in them, they didn't look angry. They looked sick. And his voice was low and a little shaky rather than booming, as was usual when a rage was indicated.

"I suppose," he said almost gently, "I ought to thank you for not stating that Loretta's job was that of a reporter on this sheet."

Having said that, he became silent, but his eyes never left Marian's face. She wanted to scream—finally she did scream.

"Why don't you bawl me out and tear the joint apart and me with it?" she shouted. "I deserve it! Go on, do it, Tod!"

"What's the use?" he said, and buried his face in his hands.

Marian suddenly realized she was crying there at her desk. She hated herself for being a woman, for having to hurt Tod merely because he wouldn't look at her.

IT WAS only a couple of minutes later that the door of the office was flung rudely open, and a dark, burly man with a pistol in his hand started blazing away. His first bullet missed Tod's head by a whisker and went through the window behind him, spidering the glass.

"The gun, Tod—Jean's gun!" yelled Marian. Ducking as low as she could, she reached for the phone on her desk and dialed Operator to call the police. With lead in the air, she didn't even have time to realize that her wild guess and story in the paper had been right.

Another bullet caught the lower rim of the green lampshade that hung from the ceiling, making it swing wildly to and fro and vibrate tunelessly.

Then a pistol went off in her ear, deafening her. One, two, three, four, five, six times it exploded, and there was no answering fusillade. Marian got her call through and looked toward the doorway, where the menace that had been Gunner Smith lay, a crumpled heap of clothes. A pool of blood was forming under his body. Outside in the city room, somebody screamed—Jean, or Loretta Mann, rather, as she saw what had happened. Police were already pouring into the office, and she was quickly subdued.

Only then, trembling, Marian turned to look at Tod. He was standing behind his desk like an avenging angel, smoking pistol in hand. But he was still in one piece.

"Oh, my!" gasped Marian, and passed out colder than a haddock. . . .

When she came to, she was lying on the couch, and Tod was plying her with the brandy that only big-shot politicians usually rated. She coughed, tried to sit up, but he pushed her back sternly.

"After what you did to me," he said, "you should be the one to faint, you sissy!"

But there was a catch in his voice as he said it that made Marian glow inside—and not because of the brandy. She closed her eyes again, carefully. She knew she was going to be kissed.

**Next Issue: MALICE IN WONDERLAND, a Swift-Moving Murder Mystery Novelet by LAWRENCE DeFOY—and Many Other Stories!**



The old man's eyes followed  
me as I crossed the room to the  
window



# YOU CAN ALWAYS DUCK

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

*A Merciless Killer Is Offered Only One Way To Escape the Pointing Finger of Guilt—and He Takes the Road of No Return!*

**D**R. CHARLES RAPP parked his coupé in Madison Street, got out, went up the short approach walk to his office. Visible through the glass of the door was one of those cards that read:

DOCTOR OUT. WILL RETURN AT

Beneath was a printed clock dial with movable hands set at 4:00 P. M. It was now 2:15.

Rapp entered quickly, closed the door behind him. He reached through white marquisette curtains, kept crisp and sterile—

looking by Alice, his wife, and unhooked the card. He brought around the hands on the clock face together, got a firm grip on them, then worked them loose from the brass eyelet that served as a common axis. They fell to the floor together—two white arrows pointing nowhere.

Dark brooding eyes stared at the card a moment. Then, as an added precaution against being disturbed, he drew a pencil line through WILL RETURN AT before replacing the card in the door.

He took firm steps across the reception room to the window that looked out on Front



Street, and again parted white curtains. He nodded. It was a smug, just-as-I-thought nod. His thin lips quirked into a smile that didn't reach into his dark eyes, that meant nothing unless it was a certain satisfaction in being right. For diagonally across the street, in the entrance of Potter's Drug-store stood the little brown man. Quite as usual.

Rapp turned from the window to Alice's desk. During the past week of her absence—she was, fortunately, on vacation at her mother's—the doctor never entered the reception room without picturing his wife at the desk in her starched white uniform, calm and lovely, as sweetly sympathetic as the young woman who looked steadfastly out from the Red Cross posters. Rapp's patients missed her, too. Alice Rapp somehow made up for the doctor's natural brusqueness.

HE SEATED himself at the desk in front of the old portable typewriter which Alice used to make out statements. As he inserted paper between platen and finger rolls, he was wondering how he was going to tell Alice what he had to tell her. "Bedside manner" was not one of his strong points, and consequently he couldn't be expected to approach the subject of murder gracefully. So after opening with "Dear Alice", which had a remarkably flat sound, he began with the little brown man:

Right now he's standing in the entrance of Potter's Drug-store. I have got used to his being there, or somewhere not too far from me, during the past four days. He tries to be completely unconcerned about the lump below the left shoulder of his coat, as though it were a tumor instead of the butt of his gun. I haven't any idea what his name is, but I always think of him as "the little brown man." He wears a sun-browned straw hat, an unpressed suit of brown tropic worsted, and scuffed brown oxfords.

Just an ordinary little man who smokes end-on-end cigarettes and takes obvious notice of the painted legs of the girls who pass. Ostensibly he has no other occupation. Actually he is watching me.

Some time within the next two hours, the little brown man will saunter across the street, as though he were going nowhere, and he'll enter this reception room. He may knock, but I doubt it. The gun makes knocking superfluous.

To make you understand this, dear, it is painfully necessary for me to go back nearly three years, when you were the wife of the best legal brain in the county, Attorney Gregory Harper. And I—well, you know how long it took people here in Kerbyville to accept "that young whipper-snapper of a

Doc Rapp." Because I was hungry I had run for Woodlawn County Coroner, had been swept into office on the tide of a protest vote. No thanks whatsoever to my beguiling personality. It was toward the end of my term as coroner that this thing began.

You remember the night. August, the dog days, when the black muck of the cornland around here gives off a stifling sweat that pervades the whole town. I wished I had gills to breathe with that night.

About eleven-thirty the ringing of the telephone brought me naked out of a hot shower. The voice from the receiver was masculine, but one of those chalk-on-blackboard squeaks. "That you, Doc?"

I assured the speaker that it was.

"Chief of Police Kriner," the voice identified itself. "Out at the Harper place. Greg's been stabbed. Fatal. And I guess nobody's surprised, unless it would be Greg himself. A man can't take a viper to him and not expect to get bit!"

Kriner meant Joe Cory. You didn't know at the time, Alice, that Joe Cory was an ex-con. But the seventeen thousand others in Kerbyville knew about it. And talked about it, especially about Joe's staying on at Greg's house after Greg had married you. Greg felt he owed the kid something. Joe, you see, had served a prison term for stealing cars and Greg had been his attorney. It had been one of Greg's first cases and he had lost it. When Joe came out of prison, Greg had given him a job and a home.

I told Chief Kriner I would be right out, and dressed hurriedly. My car was parked out under the light in Madison Street, and when I got into it, I couldn't turn over the engine. I opened the hood, was fumbling with ignition wires when I heard footsteps coming along the walk. They stopped directly behind me.

I looked down and back beneath my up-raised right arm, saw a pair of shoes sticking out of black alpaca trousers. They were old men's shoes of soft leather with "bunion bumps" highlighted from much polishing.

"Having a little mechanical difficulty, I presume?" said the owner of the shoes.

One of the insects that had been whirling around the lamp dive-bombed to the back of my neck. I slapped at it, turned around.

The man watching me was tall and severely lean. His straw sailor looked like the one James Cagney wore in "Strawberry Blonde." On a night like this, the high, starched collar this man wore would have amounted to suicide if worn by any normal man. Black ribboned glasses were balanced on his thin nose, and the eyes behind them were cool and uncompromising. The skin over his cheek-bones was as shiny as the



bumps on his shoes.

"Hot, isn't it?" he commented.

"You're certainly right!" I said.

"Then pour cold water on your carburetor and fuel line. You've got vapor-lock, most likely." He pursed colorless lips, gave me a piercing look, and marched down the street.

I SUPPOSE I stared after him like the village idiot, for I had thought he was talking about the weather rather than my car. He was as odd as his hat, and I found out some days later, when somebody pointed him out on the street, that his name was Burton Lackey, and that he was a buyer of old gold who had recently settled in Kerbyville. He became, as you know, a mighty important chapter in this doctor's odyssey.

After another futile attempt to start the car, I took the old gentleman's advice, poured cold water on the carburetor and fuel line, and got on my way.

Twenty minutes later, I was over on the other side of town and turning into the gate at the Harper place. Every light in the old white house was burning, and that fool collie pup of Greg's came bounding out to bark his greeting just as though the Greg Harpers were throwing some sort of party.

Two police cars, the sheriff's car, and Mort Thisted's ambulance—all of them shiny and black—were parked in under the elms close to the house. I put my coupé alongside the ambulance, got out, had to cuff the collie a couple of times to make it understand I wasn't there to play. There were men on the porch, gasping at the air.

"Here's Doc, Chief Kriner," one of them sung out, as I climbed the wood steps.

The Police Force of Kerbyville, as represented there that night, seemed to have only one uniform to share among its members so far as official regalia was concerned. Two of them led me back along the hall to Greg's study at the back where Chief Kriner was sitting on the edge of Greg's brown leather chair so that the back of his shirt wouldn't sweat fast to the back of the chair.

The Chief's cap was one of those ventilated affairs that chauffeurs wear in summer, and he had pinned his badge to the front of it. He was in suspenders and shirt sleeves. His shirt was faded blue except under the arms and across his barrel of a chest where sweat had dyed it navy. He was wheezing.

"You have to come clear from Chicago, Doc?" he squeaked at me.

I didn't retort, didn't explain that I had had trouble with my car. I stepped into the study cautiously, because there was blood on the floor and somebody had already tracked in it.

"Joe Cory's tracks," Chief Kriner said, and I guess there never was any doubt but what

they were Cory's tracks, since Cory admitted as much in court.

Greg Harper lay on his face on the floor. Some of those tiny green insects that always parade across the pages of a book when you're reading under a strong light on a summer night were crawling over Greg's silvery hair. I batted them off before turning the body over for my cursory examination. Out on the porch, somebody was teasing the dog. It was barking and snarling. The cop standing near me, a young fellow who looked just off the farm, moved a restless foot. "Somebody ought to chain that fool pup," he said.

"It's August," Chief Kriner sighed. "Dogs go mad in August, they say. Men, too, mebbe." He drew a long, labored breath. "Think there's anything to that, Doc?"

I shook my head. "You can't blame rabies on August."

I was looking at Greg's face. It was young, too young for the white hair that went with it. And then I got on with the examination. There was only the one wound, on the right side of the chest between the fifth and sixth ribs. I stood up finally, wiping my hands on a towel I had brought in my satchel. I nodded at Chief Kriner.

"You can figure he died less than an hour ago," I told him. "I don't think an autopsy will improve on that reckoning. There's just one wound—probably made by a knife."

Kriner's faded blue eyes pointed at Greg's desk, at the blood-stained letter-opener that lay there.

"That'll have Joe Cory's fingerprints on it," he said. "I'd give a cookie to know who it was rung me up on the phone about forty minutes ago and reported this kill. House was empty when we got here."

"It wasn't Joe Cory?" I suggested.

Kriner scoffed at the idea. "A man's voice, I think, but not Cory's." He slapped sweating palms onto the arms of the chair, got a grip and hoisted himself to his feet. "Doc, you got any notion where Mrs. Greg Harper is?"

The cop who looked green from the fields snickered. "She could have run off with Joe Cory."

I wheeled around. My left fist was loaded and cocked for the man's jaw, but before I could swing Kriner put out a thick arm in front of me. The cop colored under his Chief's glance. Nobody said anything for a few seconds. There wasn't a sound in the room except for the booming of insects that flew against the screen.

I turned my back on the green cop, spoke to Kriner. "I believe I saw in the paper that Mrs. Harper was serving on some committee that was meeting at the Country Club tonight," I said.



Kriner nodded. He stepped to the phone on the desk, lifted it. His pale eyes brooded. He gave his head half a shake and put the phone down.

"Can't do it," he said. "Anybody but Alice Harper, I guess I could." He appealed to me. "Doc, you release the body to Mort Thisted so he can get along with it to his funeral parlor. Then suppose you run out to the Country Club and get Mrs. Harper. I guess you knew her and Greg as well as anybody in town. Maybe you could break it to her gentle."

You remember, Alice, the rotten fist I made of breaking the news to you. You and five or six other women were on the clubhouse porch, all talking at once and laughing. Then I opened the screen door and the laughter dwindled. Just looking at me, the laughter dwindled.

"Why, Charles, what's wrong?" you said. "It's Greg," I said. "He's been hurt."

It must have been written all over my face. That bright colored handbag, or purse, or whatever it was you were carrying that night, slipped from your hand and plopped to the porch floor. Your eyes grew wide and bright, and then dulled. "He's dead, isn't he, Charles?" You said, "Greg's dead."

I guess I nodded. You didn't break down. I remember that on the way back in my car, you sat very straight and looked out into the cones of light from my headlamps. Your eyes were dry, and you didn't say anything until we were almost to the house. Then you asked me what had happened to Greg. I said he had been killed. I think it was then that you remembered I was the coroner.

"Not murdered! No!"

I nodded. "But who—who—" you said.

I told you they were hunting Joe Cory. You cried then, quietly, on my shoulder, and got it all out of your system before we went into the house. Mort Thisted had sent his men along with the body in the ambulance, but old Mort was there. He had a mealy-mouthed speech all ready for you. You took it smiling. And Chief Kriner patted you clumsily on the shoulder, said something about his "sincerest sympathies" with one breath, and with the next promised to personally "get" Joe Cory. You took that, too.

Remember, Chief Kriner made good that threat the next day, early in the morning. Joe Cory didn't have much imagination, apparently, for he had holed-up at the first place anybody would have looked for him—in one of the buildings at the abandoned gravel pit. Kriner had noticed that a repeating shotgun was missing from Greg's collection, so he was expecting trouble.

Joe Cory warned the cops back with a volley of shot high above their heads, then Kriner

and his boys threw in the tear gas and drove Joe into the open. Kriner himself snapped the cuffs on Joe, and there was a *Courier* cameraman waiting to snap the picture.

That picture on the front page of the *Courier* was enough to convict Joe before trial. He was looking out wildly from a shock of black hair. That scar he had received in some brawl in prison was toward the camera. You could almost read on his open lips the obscenity he hurled at Kriner. There was defiance in every line of his face. The caption under the picture didn't help Joe's cause any either:

#### EX-CON SLAYS BENEFACTOR

During the trial, Joe's story had that too-glib ring. He had gone to see his girl that night and they had quarreled early in the evening. He had walked back to the Harper house, going the long way to work off his peeve.

On reaching the Harper place, he had noticed a light in Greg's study, had gone back to find Greg stretched out on the floor, dead. Joe said he was completely dazed, that somehow he had picked up the murder knife. Then realizing how things would look for him, especially with the reputation he had, he had become panic-stricken, and had run out of the house, after taking Greg's shotgun from its case.

I remember Joe standing up from the witness chair, shouting at the court:

"I haven't got a chance! You're all against me! You're all out to railroad me straight to the devil!"

They got him down, then, and his lawyer quieted him. The prosecution built up Joe's motive on the fact that Joe's girl had turned him down the night of the murder. And according to the girl's own testimony, she had done so because she had learned that Joe was an ex-convict.

Joe, according to the prosecutor, had placed the blame for his prison term on the poor defense which Greg Harper had provided for him. Since sufficient time had elapsed between Joe's quarrel with the girl and the killing of Greg to indicate premeditation, the jury found Joe Cory guilty of first degree murder.

**I** DIDN'T miss a single session of the trial and neither did that odd old man I had encountered the night of the murder—Burton Lackey. Lackey just sat there, his back as stiff as his high starched collar, his bright, cold eyes always on Joe.

After the judge had pronounced sentence, condemning Joe to the chair, the prisoner raked shaggy black hair out of his eyes, turned his back on the bench, searched back



across the court-room. His eyes met those of old Lackey, locked with them for few seconds. And as they conducted Joe Cory from the court, I heard old Lackey clear his throat. It was a sound like dry leaves rustling in a fence corner.

That was that. The only time Kerbyville gave Joe Cory a break was when the *Courier* printed the story of his electrocution and told of Joe's last words: "I'm not afraid to die, but I never killed Greg Harper!"

It was something over a year after Greg's murder that you and I were married, Alice. A "decent" lapse of time that satisfied even Kerbyville's inveterate gossips. I went to live in the Harper house with you, but kept my own place here as an office. I cannot express how wonderful it's been.

And then last February something happened here at the office which I have never told you about. It was the night the Ackerman baby kept me out so late, remember? The night I came home with a gauze patch plastered over a small cut on my forehead and told you I had fallen on the ice.

On my way from the hospital at about three in the morning, I recalled that the weather report called for a drop in temperature and I began to worry about the car radiator. I had an extra gallon of anti-freeze in the store-room back of the office, so I decided to stop there and add some of the stuff to the solution in the radiator.

I parked in front of the office, went along the side and to the rear of the building, and let myself into the store-room by the back door. I was groping for the light pull-chain when I heard a hollow rumbling sound in the adjoining office rooms. Then quick, careful footsteps.

I opened the connecting door.

"Who's there?" I challenged.

There was no light in the surgery, and now no sound of footsteps. I moved across the room in the dark. The door of the consultation room stood open. I stepped through, heard on my left a startled, indrawn breath. I ducked a blow that probably was never started, swung up from a crouch with a long right hook that had just about everything I owned behind it. My knuckles just clipped a shoulder, were burnt on the rough wool of a coat.

Somebody backed, grunted, threw something at me. A bottle. It struck the wall behind me, shattered, drenched my coat with lysol solution. The somebody was running toward the door of the reception room, careless now of sound.

I followed, but not far. Whoever the prowler was, he had left booby traps along his route. My feet tangled with the legs and rounds of an overturned chair. I

sprawled out full length to crack my head against the corner of the door frame. Stunned, I lay there for a matter of seconds, and when I finally hauled to my feet, the prowler had gone off into the night.

I got the lights going. The place had been given a thorough search, and my first thought was that some addict had been after narcotics. I checked, found that the drugs had not been touched, and aside from that I couldn't think of a single thing that would be of the slightest use to anybody.

I dressed the cut on my forehead, put things back in order, mopped up the glass and the spilled lysol, and then went home. I didn't tell you about the prowler nor did I make a report to the police. But the event began a gnawing, nagging worry that, as time went on, took tangible shape.

The following morning, you remember, I was called to the phone from the breakfast table. A deep, lip-lazy voice identified itself as somebody named Warner.

"You know, Doc—Tubby Warner," the voice went on when it was apparent that I still wasn't clear on who was calling. "Tubby Warner in the big brick house at the top of Front Street Hill."

"All right," I said, jotting down the name and address. "Who's ill?"

"Nobody," the voice said. "Not exactly ill, but Mr. Lackey, our roomer, started out in his car this morning. He's the old gent who buys old gold from folks, you know. Got a refinery fixed up in our basement and I work for him."

"All right," I said again, impatiently. "Who wants me—you or Mrs. Warner, or Mr. Lackey?"

"Like I was saying," Tubby Warner drawled on, "Mr. Lackey started out from here in his car. He didn't know the hill was slick, I guess, and slammed hisself smack up against a light pole at the bottom. His car and him is busted up proper. He's got no kinfolk to look after him and I'd like for you to get over to the hospital and take care of him. I'll meet you there."

**Y**OU remember, Alice, what condition Burton Lackey was in when I got there. Both arms, a hip, and his jaw fractured, plus assorted bruises and lacerations. The old man had gone to pieces like a fragile toy.

"Don't spare expenses, Doc," Tubby Warner confided to me. "The old gent is dirty rich. I'll handle the bills and collect from him later. And if he don't pull through—" Tubby, I thought, seemed almost hopeful that he wouldn't—"there'll be plenty to take care of everything."

Then Tubby put his bulbous lips too close to my ear and whispered: "Old Lackey told



me he was making me his heir. How's that?"

"That," I said dryly, "is just fine."

I had never cared for Tubby nor his equally tubby wife, and I was determined to see that Lackey pulled through.

After about a month of hospital bills, and it became apparent that Lackey was going to live, Tubby began complaining about the expense. He couldn't touch Lackey's bank account, of course, for Lackey could neither speak nor write with his arms and jaw in casts. Nothing would do but that Lackey had to be moved to the Warner house. It was certainly cheaper to rent a fracture bed from Potter's Drug-store than to pay rent on a hospital room. And, according to Tubby, Mrs. Warner would make a fine nurse. The move was made.

I made it a point to drop in on Lackey at a different time each day. He had a large, comfortable room on the second floor of the house, and whenever I found he wasn't getting proper attention, I'd tell Tubby and his wife so in no uncertain terms, and right in front of the old man. Lackey's sharp, chill eyes would watch us out of a mountain of bandages.

The Warners began to get the idea through their thick skulls that what I said might cause Lackey to change his will once the casts were off his arms and he could write again. So Lackey got decent care. Only at night, I knew, were the Warners lax in their nursing. Tubby and Mrs. Warner liked to sleep too well.

Toward the end of spring, I began to talk to Lackey about getting his arms out of the casts. The arms and the jaw were getting along nicely, though I didn't hold out much hope for complete recovery from the hip injury. But at least he could count the days and the weeks ahead until he would be able to talk and to use his hands and arms again.

Just six days ago, Alice, I dropped in on Lackey before going to the hospital. I found Mrs. Warner doing some rather indifferent cleaning in the sick room. She had been moving some of Lackey's articles and dusting a bit, and she had turned up something that belonged to me, she thought.

"Is this something you left here at some time, Doctor?" she asked, goggling at me with those round, dull eyes of hers.

I looked down at what she held in her hand and suddenly got cold all over. It was one of my office record cards and the name I had written at the top was "Greg Harper."

There wasn't much in the way of medical history on the card, because Greg had only come to consult me professionally a couple of times, once for a mild attack of pleurisy. But that card had been taken from the

drawer of my file cabinet that night I had encountered the prowler. I knew it now, and I knew who the prowler was. He lay there on the bed, completely trussed up, incapable of speech—old Burton Lackey himself.

I looked at the old man. His cold blue eyes struck at me like knives. And that was about all he could do—just stare at me. I turned to Mrs. Warner and shook my head.

"No, that card's not mine," I said, and watched her drop it into the basket with trash that was to be burned.

I walked over to the big window that looked out and down Front Street Hill. The window stood open about two inches. It had broken sash cords and had to be held open by a block of wood which was wedged beneath the bottom of the sash and the sill, over on the right hand side behind the curtain. Beneath the window was a steam radiator, cold now. The radiator was equipped with one of those reservoirs which hung out of sight behind it and was intended to add moisture to the air. The reservoir was empty.

My mind worked swiftly, as a medical man's mind must work in cases of emergency. In the basement of the Warner house, old Lackey had some sort of a shop in which he and Tubby reclaimed some of the gold they bought on plated and filled articles. I stared out of the window at the sunlight and the shadows beneath the trees along Front Street, and nodded.

**I** TURNED from the window, looked back at the old man on the bed. He was so helpless now. And he could be so dangerous. "I'll be back, Mr. Lackey," I said. "This evening."

He didn't answer, couldn't have answered. But he knew what I meant.

It was nine-thirty that night when I returned, lugging my largest satchel. Through the front door of the Warner house, I could see fat Mrs. Warner lying on the couch in the living room. She had a box of chocolates on the table beside her, was looking through a movie magazine, doubtless wondering how the Hollywood girls kept their pleasant contours.

"Don't bother to get up, Mrs. Warner," I called to her cheerfully as I went in. "I'll just have a good-night look at our patient."

Mrs. Warner scowled, thrust a caramel into her cheek with her tongue so she could talk.

"I hope you get those arms of his working pretty soon, Dr. Rapp. The right one, anyway, so he can make out a check, at least, to cover expenses and pay poor Tubby. Tubby's been downstairs in the basement just about every night for the past six months,



slaving himself away, working for the old man, and not a cent of pay."

I couldn't refrain from smiling. Yes, Tubby was working himself to a mere shadow.

I went up the stairs and into the sick room. "Good evening, Mr. Lackey!" I said.

His eyes turned, following me as I crossed the room to the window. I didn't waste any time, didn't make any attempts to conceal my movements. I snapped open my satchel, took out a thick roll of newspaper which I opened. Inside, well insulated from the warmth of the night, was a cube of ice I had frozen in the tray of the refrigerator at home. I raised the window, held it open while I replaced the block of wood with the cube of ice. I kept hold of the cube until I had lowered the window far enough to pinch it tight. The melting of the cube would let the window down very slowly.

I wadded the newspaper back into my bag and took out a quart bottle of sixty per cent sulphuric acid, poured it into the empty reservoir behind the radiator. I left the window for an instant to get a nail file off old Lackey's dresser. It was one of those short, perfectly flat files. I took it back to the window, rested it on the sill, the point of it just far enough over the outer edge of the sill so that the slowly descending sash would contact it when the ice cube was all but completely melted.

On the handle of the file I put a slip of pasteboard—just an ordinary scrap such as might be found in any waste basket. I put three tablets of potassium cyanide on top of the pasteboard near the inner edge of the sill.

Then I hastily closed my satchel. I didn't bother to explain the trap to Lackey. He must have known that as the window lowered gradually it would tilt the file just a trifle. And the file would be the lever that would tip the cyanide tablets into the reservoir of acid below. And he must have known that the resultant reaction would be lethal gas such as is used in some states to enact the death penalty.

"Good night, Mr. Lackey," I said levelly, and went to the door of the room, opened it, stepped out into the hall.

Tubby Warner was there, standing at the door of the bathroom. I had expected something like that. One or the other of the fat Warners were always just around the corner, listening, I suppose, to see if I said anything to Lackey in private that might influence the old man to change his will.

"How is he, Doc?" Tubby drawled at me.

"Fine," I told him. I nodded toward the door, lowered my voice. "You might look in on him and say good night. But close the door when you come out so there won't be a draft."

Tubby nodded his bald head. "I'll do that. And I'll switch out his light, too. Light bill in this house is like to break me."

I went on down the stairs. What was there to fear? Three pills lying innocently on a sick-room window sill. Three pills and a nail file. Nothing to excite suspicion, since the ice cube couldn't be seen behind the curtain. And then Tubby wasn't the sort to notice things.

I nodded to Mrs. Warner as I passed her in the living room, went out the front door and hurried to the car. There I turned and looked back. There was still a light in the old man's room and the window was still open a crack. I waited for dragging seconds, breathed deeply when the light snapped out and I knew Tubby had left the room. He and his wife slept in rooms on the ground floor, and no one would be any wiser until the morning.

AT MY office, I worked until well after eleven, getting out statements so you wouldn't have that to do when you returned, and didn't get home until about midnight. When I turned into the drive, I saw that another car was there ahead of me. Chief of Police Kriner climbed out of the car. I braked, put my head out of the window, asked Kriner what was up.

"Doc, the funniest dang thing happened," Kriner said, resting a thick forearm on the car window sill. "Up at the Warner house tonight."

"What?" I kept my voice level.

"Tubby Warner fell down the steps," Kriner squeaked. He rested a foot on the running board and slapped his thigh. "Yes sir, fell all the way down from upstairs. And Mrs. Warner, she went into hysterics, screaming fit to kill. Mr. and Mrs. Cook from next door came on the run."

"Was Tubby hurt?" I managed to ask.

"Naw," Kriner said. "Just knocked a little silly. Thing was, though, that Mr. Cook got to thinking about that patient of yours upstairs. What would old Lackey think of all the racket? So Mr. Cook ran upstairs to assure old Lackey everything was all right. He went into Lackey's room and the blame place was filled with gas."

"Gas?" I tried to sound astonished.

"Poison gas," Kriner said. "Lethal. Hydrocyanic acid gas."

"Good lord!" I gasped. "If Lackey and Tubby were working with gold down there in that shop in the basement, there probably was cyanide down there. You don't think Tubby would—"

"Kill the old gent for his money?" Kriner's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Could be. Tubby was telling it around town that he was remembered in old Lackey's will. But



then, Doc, you were at the Warner place tonight about nine-thirty."

"Me?" I laughed. "If a doctor wanted to kill somebody, he could think up a more subtle way than lethal gas. Besides—"

"Sure, a doc could think up something more subtle," Kriner said. "But would he? Would a smart doc pick out something that only a doc would know about? Or would he use gas or a blunt instrument. Or maybe a knife?"

I laughed again. "Kriner, you're not serious, surely? Why would I work to save the old man's life and then take it away from him? What possible motive would I have?"

Kriner rubbed his jaw.

"Dunno about the motive you might have, Doc. Might be something connected with the stabbing of Greg Harper here three year ago. You see, when we were poking around in old Lackey's room, we found some papers that indicate Joe Cory was old Lackey's son. Of course Lackey had disowned him after Joe got into trouble the first time, but there's that connection, see?"

"Maybe somehow Lackey found out Joe Cory didn't stab Greg. After all, Doc, you did marry Greg's widow and got the best-looking, sweetest girl in the whole town of Kerbyville. And it's just about got to be you or Tubby who tried to kill old Lackey."

"Tried?" I caught myself gasping. "I thought you said Lackey was dead?"

Kriner shook his head. "Nope. The gas had just started to work when Mr. Cook burst into Lackey's room. Cook's a big man. He just picked the old gent up, casts and splints and all, and lugged him out of that room, got him to open air. Lackey's in the hospital now, and when either he can talk or write, I guess he'll inform us who tried to kill him."

Kriner yawned.

"Probably it'll be Tubby. But you don't mind, Doc, if we sort of keep an eye on you, so you don't skip town until we know for sure? And don't try to get to Lackey in the hospital neither, because he's under guard."

That, Alice, is just about the whole story. Old Burton Lackey must have believed those last words of Joe Cory: "I'm not afraid to die, but I never killed Greg Harper." And if anybody were to believe Joe innocent, then I must have loomed conspicuously as a suspect. Lackey doubtless remembered his encounter with me the night of the murder, remembered that my car had vapor-locked from a hard, fast run that hot night.

"Perhaps Lackey thought he could check up on the calls I made that evening by going through my records. That must have been what led him to break into my office. He didn't find what he was looking for, but

found something far more damning in the case record card I had made out for Greg Harper.

You see, Alice, Greg was a rather rare physical specimen. The position of his heart was completely reversed. That is, the apex of the heart was on the right side instead of the left. It happens perhaps one time in a million, and I had made a note to that effect on the card. To kill Greg swiftly with one thrust of a knife, the blade had to enter to the right between the fifth and sixth ribs. And only Greg's physician would know that.

You can't blame rabies on the dog days, nor passion on August. I killed Greg Harper because I've loved you always, because I hated him for possessing you.

Today, this afternoon, at the hospital, Burton Lackey will be able to write. So you understand, Alice, why the little brown man with the gun stands in the entrance of Potter's Drug-store with one eye on the passing girls and the other on the door of my office.

AT FOUR o'clock, the little brown man stepped out to the curb and to the door of a black car that had driven up in front of the drug-store. He opened the car door and Chief of Police Kriner alighted heavily.

"How you like it in plain clothes, Sarg?" Kriner's high-pitched voice asked of the little brown man.

The man shook his head. "I'd rather my gun was right out in the open where it wouldn't be so conspicuous. . . What's the word from the hospital?"

Kriner sighed. "It's Doc all right. On both counts—knifing Greg Harper and tryin' to do away with old Lackey. Comes to my mind now, it must have been Doc who tipped us off the night Greg was murdered. Doc wouldn't have wanted Alice to come home from the Country Club and discover Greg's body. He'd be thoughtful of Alice."

They crossed the street together, to the door of Dr. Charles Rapp's office. The little brown man didn't knock. He walked right in, stood there with one hand on the door, looking down at the floor of the motionless figure of Dr. Rapp. Rapp's right hand clenched a small bottle.

Kriner and the little brown man dropped to their knees beside the doctor, and the Police Chief pressed fingers into Rapp's wrist, then turned to his companion. Kriner shook his head.

"He ducked."

"Well, he had time enough," the little brown man said.

**BUY WAR STAMPS AND BONDS**



Private Detective Joe  
McGee Meets a Pretty  
Blonde — and Starts  
Out on a Grim  
Death Chase!



The girl snatched a revolver  
from her purse and began firing

# DIAMONDS FLUSHED

By BENTON BRADEN

JOE MCGEE'S eyes began to sparkle as he read the story in the *Morning Globe* headed DEAD MAN HAD FORTUNE IN DIAMONDS. Here was a case that apparently had the police stymied. It was a situation in which a smart private detective might take a hand and, with a little luck, grab off a few honest dollars.

Joe's eyes grew brighter as he re-read the more important facts of the story.

"The fully-clothed body was found in a vacant lot in the suburb of Elmdale last night. The man had been of medium size and wore a short beard. His suit was new and of good material. The first impression of the police was he had been killed and his body thrown into the vacant lot by gangsters.

"That theory was upset after detectives failed to make an identification. When the

man's fingerprints were taken and checked, it was found he had no criminal record. The police began to suspect they were up against something unusual, for there was not a single identifying mark on the dead man's clothes. No tags or labels or marks of any kind.

"When the police felt small hard objects in the material of the suiting, they ripped it open, and were amazed to find diamonds. The dead man's clothes were literally lined with precious stones. Police estimate that at least twenty-five thousand dollars worth of the gems were skillfully secreted in the suit.

"So far the police have only a number of baffling questions to answer. Who was this man and where did he come from? If he was not a criminal, why was he carrying a fortune in diamonds? If his murderers were



after the gems, why did they not examine the clothing?

"Several wholesale dealers in diamonds were called last night but none was able to identify the dead man. The body is at the police morgue and police are hopeful that identification will be made today."

Joe McGee went over these facts, or the lack of them, while he finished his late breakfast.

As a private detective he was strictly on his own. He had had considerable experience with gem cases. There was an outside chance that he could identify the body at the morgue. Or he might turn up a lead that the cops were overlooking.

Joe hurried out of the restaurant. He was twenty-eight, rather short, with the wide shoulders of a halfback.

Stopping a taxi, he rode downtown.

Joe was just about to enter the morgue building, when a tall man who carried himself with an air of great importance, came hurrying out. He collided with Joe.

"You dumb clout!" the stranger sputtered angrily. "Why don't you look where you're going?"

"The same to you," Joe said, annoyed by the man's tone. "If you can't be more polite, then get out of my way."

The big man glared, but he lost his nerve and stepped out of the way.

Joe went on into the morgue, through the small reception hall, passed down a corridor and turned into a chillroom.

A LINE of people was slowly passing a slab that had been wheeled into the center of the quarters. Joe got in the line. When his turn came, he looked at the features of the corpse. It was a most unimpressive face, with a neatly trimmed beard.

Joe was disappointed. He had never seen the dead man before. As he stepped out of the line, there was a tap on his shoulder.

He turned to find Lieutenant of Detectives Karn before him.

"You here on business or just doing a little sight-seeing?" Karn asked crisply.

"Just curiosity," Joe answered. "I read about the case in the paper this morning. Thought I'd come down."

"As I recall it you've been mixed up in a lot of gem cases," Lieutenant Karn said, his tone pointed. "Maybe you have some idea about this one?"

"Not an idea in the world, Lieutenant," Joe denied. "I've acted for insurance companies in most of the cases I've worked on. No company has let out a cheep to me about this one."

"And no company will," Karn said emphatically. "The gems we found on this body

weren't insured, or we'd have heard something. This case is getting my goat, Joe. Nobody has been reported missing. No diamond robberies have been reported. Not a whisper from anybody. I never heard of a case like it. We've hauled in a hundred people, but no one has ever seen this man before."

"He didn't drop in from Mars," Joe said. "Somebody knew him. Somebody was very much interested in him, interested enough to put him away for keeps."

"The killer must have known that he was in some kind of a diamond deal," Karn went on. "Yet he didn't bother to check the dead man's clothes. The killer could have found those diamonds in a minute if he'd made a close search. Why didn't he search the dead man? He just cracked him over the back of the head and tossed him in that vacant lot. That's the angle that's got me."

Joe didn't make answer. His eyes were on a girl who was in the line approaching the body on the slab. She was a blonde, a nice-looking girl. She wasn't wearing much make-up. She didn't need it. Her lips were full and perfectly formed. She was about twenty.

Joe watched her as she moved with the line of visitors. She wasn't shrinking, as were other women, from the ordeal of looking into the face of the dead. Her eyes showed determination and eagerness. This girl wasn't here as a matter of curiosity. She had a purpose.

She moved quickly into position when her turn came. Her head bowed just a little as she looked intensely at the corpse.

Joe saw her expression change. Had she recognized the man on the slab? Joe couldn't be sure, but he had a hunch she had never seen the dead man before. Her expression would have indicated surprise had she looked into the face of one whom she had known.

Yet her face had shown something. What was it? Satisfaction? That was as near as Joe could come to it. This girl had had some idea or hunch when she came into the morgue. Her inspection of the dead man convinced her she was right. Whatever was on her mind, she knew something about the mystery of the concealed diamonds.

Edging away from Lieutenant Karn, Joe left the room and went on out to the street.

He was idling along the sidewalk when the blonde hurried out of the morgue. She walked two blocks, then took a bus.

Joe got a taxi and trailed the bus. It was a simple matter to follow her when she left the bus fifteen minutes later. She went in the Ledgman Building. But Joe didn't have an opportunity to get into the elevator with her and spot the floor where she got off.

He reasoned that she would come down



within a reasonable time, so he waited, watching the descending elevators. He glanced at his watch when the elevators began to disgorge passengers in droves. It was noon and the occupants of the building were going out to lunch. He saw the blonde leave an elevator.

This time she was not alone. There was a trim brunette with her. They walked two blocks and entered a cafe.

So the blonde worked in the Ledgman Building and she was going out to lunch as usual, just as though viewing a dead man at the morgue was part of her regular routine.

JOE was in the crowd at the elevators in the Ledgman Building when the blonde and the brunette returned from lunch. He was in the elevator with them as the cage shot upward. He got out at the eighth floor with them. The blonde and the brunette parted. The blonde went on down the corridor, opened a door, and went in.

Joe strolled past the door on which was lettered, "Fred Kloth, Wholesale Jeweler."

It was an elaborate establishment, Joe could tell from the space that the business occupied. Fred Kloth was known to be a small operator, but a dealer could handle a lot of diamonds in a couple of rooms.

Thirty minutes later, Joe McGee, with a pad of paper in his hand, entered the Kloth establishment. The blonde was sitting at a desk in the outer room.

"I'm compiling information for the City Directory," Joe announced briskly. "I imagine you can give me all the dope I want, names and addresses, and so forth."

"I might," the pretty blonde conceded.

"I'll start with you," he said as he poised pencil over pad. "You're a secretary, aren't you? May I have your name and address?"

"My name is Anna Hulm," she said evenly. "I live with my parents, at 3763 Edgewood. It's an apartment."

"Hulm," Joe repeated. "Now that's a new name on me. Swedish, isn't it?"

"Dutch," she corrected.

Joe glanced at the lettering on the door. "Is Kloth a Dutch name too?"

"No. It's German. But Mr. Kloth has been in this country twenty years. He's naturalized. His home address is 457 Pine Place. That's out in Cherrywood, a suburb."

"Is he married? Have a family?" Joe questioned.

Before she could reply, a door opened and a stocky man with light brown hair came into the room.

"I'm leaving, Miss Hulm," he said. "I probably won't be back today. I'll phone before closing time."

"The boss?" Joe asked, as the executive went out.

"Yes," Anna Hulm replied. "He's Mr. Kloth."

"I'd like to have talked to him," Joe said. "He handles diamonds, doesn't he? I'd like to know what he thinks about that case where the man was found out in Elmdale with all those diamonds sewed in his clothes. You read about it, didn't you? I wonder what he was doing with the stones?"

Anna Hulm stiffened just a little.

"I wouldn't have the slightest idea," she said coldly.

"Neither have the cops," Joe grinned.

"They can't figure it at all. They can't even find out who the dead man was. And nobody has reported any missing diamonds. Now how do you figure that out?"

"I don't," she said abruptly. "I'm very busy."

Joe took the hint, scratched on his pad, asked another question, then left.

It was a cinch, Joe reasoned, that Kloth had sent Anna Hulm to the morgue to take a look at the body.

Kloth probably knew the dead man but hadn't wanted to attract attention to himself by appearing at the morgue. So he had given Anna Hulm a description and sent her to check.

Kloth had told Anna he would phone before closing time. He was probably going to give her some instructions. Joe knew he wouldn't be able to follow Anna again in daylight.

When she thought it over, she might be suspicious of his visit. She would spot him in a minute if he made an attempt to shadow her. Kloth was the man to watch, anyway. Kloth was the one who knew all the answers.

Joe McGee decided he would have a showdown with Kloth. He would find Kloth and directly accuse him of being implicated in the death of the man found in Elmdale. If Kloth refused to talk Joe would call the police and let them sweat it out of the diamond merchant. Then Joe would be in on any reward that might be forthcoming for the recovery of the gems.

IT WAS about nine o'clock at night when Joe parked his car on Pine Place in Cherrywood. Number 457 was a bungalow. Joe parked his car about thirty yards short of the walk that led to the front porch. The house was dark, so Joe waited for Kloth to return home.

It was twenty minutes before he saw a soul. Then a man appeared at the corner, walking fast. Joe could only see his figure indistinctly in the darkness, but the man turned in at the Kloth bungalow. The new-



comer stopped across the porch. Joe could see him inserting a key in the lock. A moment later a light flashed on in the house.

Hardly ten seconds passed before Joe heard a shout inside the bungalow. Joe started to get out of his car. But he halted as he discovered a figure stealing through the shadows at one side of the bungalow. It was a girl.

She hesitated when she reached the street curb. Then she spotted Joe's car, and made for it.

At the same time, a gun roared and yellow flame spurted from the dark at the side of the bungalow. The girl staggered but didn't stop. The gun roared again. This time, the girl turned, snatching a revolver from her purse. She flung shot after shot into the darkness behind her.

She was only a few steps from Joe's car now. Evidently her first purpose had been to place the automobile between her and the bungalow for protection. When she saw there was a driver in the car, she changed her mind in a split second. The muzzle of her revolver came up, pointing directly at Joe's head.

"Start your motor!" she ordered frantically. "Get going! Quick, or that man will kill us both!"

As Joe stepped on the starter, she flung open the rear door of the sedan and fell in. But her gun was only off him for a second. He felt the steel of the muzzle press against the back of his neck.

"Fast!" she commanded shrilly. "Get away from here."

Joe obeyed without argument.

There was a good chance that the gunman at the bungalow might open up again. Joe was in a good position to absorb a bullet.

He felt sure the girl behind him knew all the answers. If he could get the gun away from her, he might persuade her to talk.

Joe made two blocks in record time. Then he slowed down. "Where to?" he asked casually. "A police station?"

"No!" the voice behind him exclaimed. "Just keep driving. I'll tell you when to stop and let me out!"

Joe drove on for a few more blocks.

"I think we'd better pull over to the curb and have a talk now," he suggested.

"Keep driving!" she said hoarsely. "Keep driving or I'll—"

"Shoot me?" Joe asked dryly. "I don't think so, Anna Hulm. That's a revolver you have. And unless I made a bad mistake, you emptied it when you turned and returned the fire at the bungalow. You triggered six shots. Your gun is empty."

She couldn't find an answer.

Joe deliberately braked the sedan into

the curb. He twisted his body and threw up his shoulder to protect himself in case she tried to hit him over the head with her gun. But she didn't.

Joe figured she would try to run for it, so he leaped from the halting car to head her off. But she made no effort to leave the sedan. Joe opened the rear door. He had to catch her as she sprawled onto the running board. In the light of a street lamp, one glance revealed that the girl was unconscious.

She had staggered once when the shots had been fired at her. A bullet had apparently grazed her head, for red trickled down the side of her cheek. Excitement had kept her going for awhile. But she had passed out as Joe braked the sedan to a stop.

There was nothing to do but get her medical attention at once.

Joe pushed her back into the car as gently as possible, then drove toward the boulevard. The Cherrywood Hospital was just four squares beyond.

A few minutes later, he lifted the girl from the car and carried her into the hospital. She was still unconscious. Joe made a brief explanation as he turned her over to a uniformed nurse. Then he ran back to his car, ignoring the protests of the hospital attendants.

**J**OE drove to Kloth's bungalow. He hardly expected to find Kloth there. But if it had been Kloth who fired the shots Joe couldn't take chances. He parked a block away and walked to Number 457. Kloth hadn't bothered to turn out the lights in his home.

Joe went to the side of the bungalow and looked in a window where light showed beneath a drawn curtain.

Kloth was inside the house. And there was another man with him, a very large man with an arrogant face and a domineering sneer. It was the tall stranger with whom Joe had collided the morning he entered the morgue.

Joe could just see their heads and shoulders, and it was obvious they were having a hot argument. The big man's features were red with anger. Kloth's face was pale and showed fear. Kloth was trying to convince the big man about something.

Kloth didn't succeed.

Joe didn't see the gun. He couldn't see the big man's hands move. But as a gun roared, Joe could tell by the way Kloth's body jerked that the diamond merchant was being hit repeatedly.

Drawing his own weapon, Joe raced to the front of the bungalow. He leaped on the porch and went through the front door. But it was too late.

[Turn to page 70]



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A door slammed at the rear of the bungalow. The big man hadn't wasted any time.

Joe went back to the porch, then circled the house. There were open lawns at the rear of the dwellings of the street. The fugitive had run across the back yards. There was no sign of him.

Joe went back into the bungalow and made his way to the room where the shooting had occurred. Fred Kloth was lying on the floor. His eyes were glassy and red was bubbling at his lips.

"You must know you're dying, Kloth," Joe said, kneeling beside the diamond merchant. "You better talk while you can. Who shot you? I saw him. What was his name?"

Kloth gathered his strength to make a reply.

"Studemann," he whispered.

"He killed you over diamonds?" Joe asked. It was ten seconds before Kloth could get out a word.

"I didn't know. Studemann was in with Vohm. I killed Vohm. Studemann knew all about the diamonds. He thought he could—"

"Vohm was the man killed in Elmdale?" Joe asked.

Kloth didn't answer but his expression gave an affirmative answer.

"Where does Anna Hulm come in? Did you shoot at her tonight?"

But Fred Kloth had answered his last question. The light faded slowly in his eyes. He choked a little, then settled into death.

Joe found a phone and called the police. But he didn't wait for the police to arrive.

He went to his car and drove away. He wanted to see Anna Hulm as soon as she could talk. Police were probably at the bedside. The hospital officials would have called them.

Joe stopped at a drug store, entered a pay booth, called the hospital. He asked if the girl he had carried into the hospital had recovered consciousness.

"Yes," a hospital attendant replied. "She recovered five minutes after you brought her in. She seemed more mad than hurt. She accused you and us, too, of stealing her bag. Then she ran out of the hospital. If you're the man who brought her here, you'd better come right out here and do some explaining. The police want to know how the girl was hurt."

"I'll explain it all in due time," Joe said and hung up.

He was puzzled. Anna Hulm had accused the nurses of stealing a bag. But Joe hadn't found a bag in the car after carrying Anna Hulm into the hospital. Was it possible that she could have carried one when she fled from the bungalow? His attention had been concentrated on the gun she had held. If she



had carried anything, it must still be in the back of the automobile.

**H**E RETURNED to his sedan and used a flashlight. Anna Hulm's bag was jammed down in a corner of the rear cushions. Joe lifted it out. He opened the zipper arrangement at the top.

Joe thrust his hand into the bag and his fingers closed on a pouch of stones. His eyes bulged when he examined his find with a flashlight. Diamonds! Not run-of-the-mill gems. Large and beautifully-cut stones gleamed in his hand. Joe hastily returned the diamonds to the pouch and looked around to see if anyone had observed him. He put the girl's bag on the front seat and drove off.

No wonder Anna Hulm had thrown a fit when she regained consciousness at the hospital and discovered that the pouch had vanished. No wonder the killer of Vohm, in Elmdale the night before, hadn't bothered to search the dead man. The gems that had been sewed into the clothing of the corpse were chicken feed compared with the pouch Joe held.

The diamonds in the leather pouch would run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. How had Anna Hulm or Fred Kloth, or the man that Kloth had called "Studemann," obtained them? Certainly not from a robbery or ordinary crime. Such a loss would have been discovered and reported.

Joe McGee drove to 3763 Edgewood Street, the address of the apartment which Anna Hulm had given him when he posed as a

[Turn Page]

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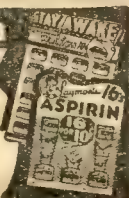
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directory man. She hadn't told a falsehood. A card on a mail box bore the name of M. Hulm.

Joe went up and rang the apartment bell. The door opened after half a minute. A tall, stooped man of about sixty looked over his spectacles at Joe.

"Is Anna here?" Joe asked.

The elderly man shook his head. "No, she is not in."

"You are her father?"

"Yes."

"My name is Joe McGee, Mr. Hulm. I'm a private detective. I think it is just as important to Anna as it is to me that I get in touch with her at once. Hasn't she phoned you in the last hour?"

"No." Hulm was nervous.

Joe had kept the leather pouch of Anna's bag from Hulm's sight. Now he held it up.

"Have you ever seen this before, Mr. Hulm?"

The man shook his head.

"Your daughter had it in her possession earlier in the evening, Mr. Hulm. I got hold of it by accident. The contents of this pouch are very valuable. A man was murdered last night because of its contents. Are you sure you know nothing about it?"

Hulm's shoulders sagged.

"I think I know what is in the pouch," he admitted. "I'll be glad to tell you all I know about it. Will you come in?"

Joe was watchful as he followed Hulm into a modestly furnished living room. The man motioned Joe to a chair, sat down himself. Joe placed the pouch on his right thigh.

"The bag contains diamonds, doesn't it?" Hulm asked.

"That's right. Do you know where they came from?"

"The old country," Hulm said slowly. "The Netherlands. I was born in Rotterdam. I have a brother still living in Rotterdam. The diamonds, part of them at least, belong to my brother."

"You mean they were smuggled into this country?"

"Not by us," Hulm replied. "I'll explain in a few words what happened."

HULM said his brother was a large dealer in diamonds in Rotterdam. For years his brother had done business with a German buyer named Emil Vohm. Hulm's brother had entertained Vohm in his home numerous times. They were friends or so Hulm's brother thought. Then came the war and the German invasion of the Netherlands. Vohm came with the invaders. He was no longer a friend. He was a member of the Gestapo.

"As a diamond buyer, Vohm knew all the trade in Rotterdam," Hulm related. "He



proceeded to act like the rest of the Nazi robbers. He jailed my brother's wife and set a ransom. To save her my brother turned over more than a hundred thousand dollars worth of diamonds to him. Vohm worked on other diamond dealers in the same way. He collected millions in gems. I don't think," Hulm's voice crackled dryly, "that he turned all of them over."

"He put aside a nice fortune for himself?" Joe suggested.

"That's what my brother suspected. My brother also knew that Vohm had a cousin in this country by the name of Frederick Kloth. My brother suspected that sooner or later Vohm would try to get some of the gems to the United States and dispose of them through Kloth. My brother wrote me that. My daughter, Anna, managed to get a job as Kloth's secretary so she could watch him. All this happened, of course, before we got into the war."

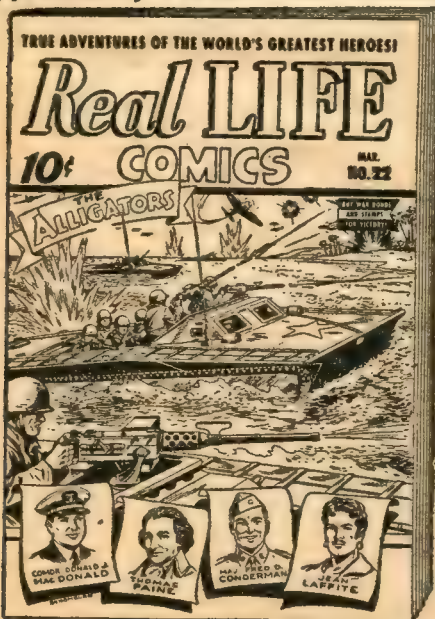
"I see," Joe nodded. "Vohm finally got to this country with the diamonds. Was he the unidentified man found in Elmdale?"

"He was killed by Kloth!" a strange voice spoke.

Joe hadn't noticed whether the front door locked when he had closed it. Now he knew it hadn't locked. The tall arrogant Studemann was moving into the room. He held an automatic in his hand.

[Turn Page]

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"Yes, Kloth killed my friend, Vohm," Studemann repeated. "I choked the truth out of him tonight. He killed Kloth for two reasons. First, he wanted all the diamonds. Second, he was afraid if he permitted Vohm to live, then he, too, would be accused of being a Nazi agent when the F. B. I. got suspicious of Vohm. Kloth did not know I was in partnership with Vohm, that I knew Vohm had the diamonds. Those diamonds belong to me. At any rate I am going to take them. Hand them over!"

"I don't think you'll ever cash in on these diamonds, Studemann," Joe said. "And send the money back to your beloved Hitler."

"Bah! Neither Vohm nor I had any intention of sending money to Hitler. We know the jig is up. Germany has lost the war. We look out for ourselves now. With those diamonds, I can bribe my way anywhere. I'll get to Argentina, and live in luxury. Kloth told me Anna Hulm stole the pouch from him. I come just in time."

"Right after you killed Kloth, Studemann. You got the truth out of Kloth. Then you shot him in his own home."

"No one can prove that."

"I saw you do it, Studemann," Joe replied. "I was looking in a window. You ran out the back door and got away before I could catch up with you."

Studemann shrugged.

"A small matter," he sneered. "You will never tell. I am going to kill you and Hulm. Then I will take the diamonds and wait for Anna to return. When I leave, I do not think your police will be able to pick up any trail."

Joe was weighing his chances as Studemann talked. Joe was fast with a gun. But his odds were pretty slim to draw and beat Studemann to the first shot. He'd have to distract his attention for a moment in some way.

"I took the diamonds out of the pouch before I came here," Joe said. "The pouch is filled with pebbles now. The police have the diamonds."

"Give me the pouch!" Studemann shouted.

"All right," Joe said easily. "See for yourself."

He picked up the pouch from his thigh as though he were going to hand it over to Studemann. Instead, he tossed the pouch just beyond reach of Studemann's hand. As Studemann stooped to pick up the gems, Joe reached for his gun. Studemann's eyes left him for just an instant.

But another voice spoke from concealment—

"Don't touch that pouch, Studemann! Drop your gun and put your hands up!"

Studemann froze. The voice belonged to a girl, and it came from a doorway that led into a back room of the apartment. No one



was visible there, but Joe recognized the voice of Anna Hulm.

Studemann hesitated for no more than a second. He didn't drop his gun. He whirled and flung a wild shot in the direction of the doorway. He fired another before he saw he had no target. Studemann tried to turn back to Joe, but he was too late. Joe was leaping.

**J**OE hit Studemann with a wide shoulder at the belt line and carried him across the room. Studemann fought to keep his balance. The big man was almost off his feet when Joe smashed him into the wall. Studemann's head struck the plaster. Stunned, he dropped his gun as he collapsed. Joe's hand flicked out to the gun. Then the detective stepped back.

Anna Hulm came into the room. There was a bandage on her head.

"I didn't have another gun," Anna said. "I hoped I could distract him long enough to give you and father a chance."

"It sure helped out," Joe said with a wry grin. "I think I've got it all about straight now, Anna. I saw you when you visited the morgue this morning. I could tell that you had found out something when you looked at Vohm."

"I knew it was Vohm from the description my uncle had written father," she replied. "I have been working for Kloth for a long time, waiting and watching. About a month ago Kloth gave up his apartment and rented a bungalow in Cherrywood. This morning

[Turn Page]



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I read the story in the paper, how a man had been found with diamonds sewn in his clothes. I went down to see the body. I knew then that Kloth had killed Vohm so he wouldn't have to split the fortune."

Joe McGee grinned.

"Studemann said Kloth figured he wouldn't have to take the risk of harboring a Nazi agent," Joe remarked. "He'd probably got the chair if the F.B.I. had caught him with Vohm. Kloth was playing it safe. You reasoned that Kloth had the diamonds, so you went to his bungalow tonight and stole them from him."

"Yes," Anna admitted. "I had already searched that bungalow on several occasions when Kloth was not at home. I thought he might have letters hidden there somewhere. I didn't find any letters or diamonds, but I did find a hiding place under a floor in a closet. There was nothing in it, but I believed Kloth had prepared it as a place to hide the diamonds when he got them. So tonight I went straight to that closet. I found the pouch there. But Kloth had nailed the flooring down, and it took me some time to pry up the boards. Kloth returned just as I was getting ready to leave the house. He spotted me as I ran down the back hall. He chased me, shot at me as I made for your car, the only cover I could see on the street at the moment."

"You recognized me, didn't you?" Joe asked hopefully. "You knew I had been in your office today?"

"Yes, I remembered you when I saw your face. I didn't know what your game was. All I could do was force you to drive me away. I guess I fainted. When I regained consciousness in the hospital and found the pouch was gone, I thought I had lost out. Father and I were talking it over when you rang our doorbell. I had intended to take enough diamonds to cover my uncle's losses, so he would have something to start on when the war is over, then turn the rest over to the police."

Studemann was showing signs of life and Joe pointed the gun suggestively at him.

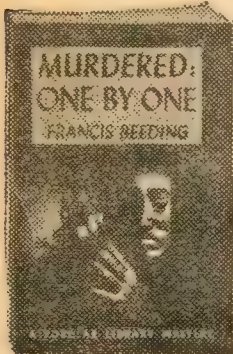
"Take it easy, Studemann," Joe ordered. "You can hold that seat till the cops get here."

Then he spoke to the girl. "I'm afraid, Anna, I can't let you hold out your uncle's share of those diamonds. But I'm pretty sure that if you get a lawyer, he can attach them and tie them up until after the war. Then you'll be able to prove your case and make a complete recovery for your uncle. As for now, I think you and I can split a reward for the recovery of the stones. They are enemy property. It's a cinch that Kloth or Studemann would have wound up with all the rocks if you hadn't been on the job."



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## HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

the other, the next complication ensues when—but hold on there, Mr. and Mrs. Reader! We aren't going to tell you the whole story now! So let's hop on the Johnny Castle bandwagon with **IT COMES UP MURDER**. Lots of Montanye rooters are already aboard so no crowding please! You'll like the way the famous reporter of the *Orbit* solves this one. You'll never guess either the criminal or the motive.

### Lost Identity

Another grand novelet next issue is **TWO RINGS FOR DEATH**, by that brilliant teller of enthralling tales, **Eric A. Provost**.

How would you like to find yourself in jail during the heat of August, accused of murder, when you don't even know the name of your alleged victim?

That's what happens to **Chris Mathews**, honorably discharged veteran of Anzio and the Italian Campaign. Only, why did everybody keep calling him **Johnny Martin**?

The last thing he remembers is that friendly couple on the train and the drinks they gave him. It was during the cold of February then, he recalls. Where did he get the ring that was now on his finger, bearing the initials **J. M.** and what happened during those lost seven months? Who was he, anyhow?

People keep coming to his cell door to visit him—people he doesn't remember ever seeing before. There is the lawyer who wants twenty-five hundred as a retainer to defend him. Poor **Chris** knows he doesn't have as much as twenty-five dollars.

Then there is the girl who returns an engagement ring to him. He finds out her name is **Ruth** and that she is the daughter of the Chief of Police. She's sweet, too!

The next visitor is that red-headed fellow **Conway**, who insists that he and **Chris** were "like that"—as he holds up two tight fingers.

Sleeping it over, **Chris** feels that he is surely headed for the Hot Seat. That is why, when **Conway** engineers the jailbreak for him, **Chris**, in panic, falls in with the scheme. He doesn't realize a jailer will be killed during the getaway.

This fellow **Conway** seems like a real pal. So does his wife, **Ethel**. In the **Conway's** home, **Chris** realizes that now he really is hot. Yet in the back of his mind there is a strange suspicion, especially when **Ethel Conway** offers him a highball.

Then things really **DO** happen!

Naturally, **Uncle Sam** comes somewhat to **Chris'** rescue by proving he is in the **Armed Forces**, but what has happened to his **Discharge Papers**? Also by now there is not only the murder of the woman who befriended **Chris** to clear up, but the killing of the jailer



as well. If you're looking for fast action and plenty of it, author Provost is the man who can dish it out. This is a story from an entirely different angle than we have ever presented before. We're sure you're going to demand an encore by Eric A. Provost—and soon!

### Malice in Wonderland

Novelet number three for next issue is **MALICE IN WONDERLAND**, by Lawrence DeFoy.

The action of this gripping yarn takes place in the Wonderland Dance Palace, where dime-a-dance gals hold forth, each wearing a badge with her name on it to complete her enticing outfit. **MALICE IN WONDERLAND** is replete with clever dialogue, good characterization and the swiftest action we've seen in many a day!

George Carewe of the Carkin Agency is doing some investigating for the Consolidated Life Insurance Company. A certain Vesta Marslyk, pretty Czech, has a lot of insurance on her. The beneficiary claims she is now dead, but cannot produce any certificate to that effect. Rumor has it that the girl works at the dance palace. Fat Jim Bowles, the proprietor, claims he has never heard of her. He is backed by his bouncer, Frankie Romano, gunman and snowbird.

Carewe insists on seeing the employees' ledger. Bowles and Romano make all kinds of excuses and while they're arguing there's a scratching and hair-pulling fight between two of the girls. Carewe threatens to tell the police the fact that marihuana cigarettes are being peddled at the dance hall.

The ledger is in the private office upstairs. Carewe, Bowles and Romano go to get it. They are not away long before a piercing scream comes from the girls' dressing-room. Carewe rushes in to find Gilda, one of the girls, dead upon the floor; a knife deeply embedded in her neck!

The pace, from that moment on, accelerates in a startling, bewildering crescendo. Of course, McCorkle of Homicide is called in. So come on along, folks, and meet wise-cracking Lucille the cashier, sloe-eyed Helene, blond Fifi and the rest of the "50-count 'em—50" beautiful hostesses of the Wonderland Dance Palace in **MALICE IN WONDERLAND**!

[Turn page]

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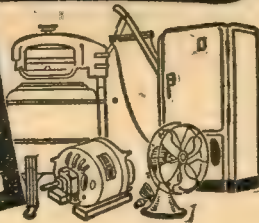
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Naturally, there will be our usual run of splendid short stories in addition to the featured novelet. All in all, a gala issue is on the way!

### IN THE MAIL BAG

**D**ON'T know whether the following is a knock or a boost, so we'll print it in full and let you be the judge.

I have been reading your magazines for a great many years—not only THRILLING DETECTIVE, but many of your companion periodicals. If I didn't like them, I wouldn't have continued buying them. Some of your heroes are a little too much on the perfect side. Bullets bounce off their chests, crease their scalps, nick the buttons on their coats and make holes in the crowns of their hats. Otherwise, they are unharmed.

They certainly are a bunch of superior beings to say the least. Some of your detectives, too, are considerably of the "Smart Aleck" variety. They are of the see-all-tell-all variety, which is something of a record-breaking compound word—what? Nothing seems to faze them. That is why I was particularly carried away by the story THREE HOURS OF DANGER, in a recent issue of THRILLING DETECTIVE.

Your leading character, "Pop" Cooper, was a regular Rube, with hayseed in his hair. He was an old codger who wasn't a bit photogenic. Yet he solved that crime not only sensitively, but sensibly as well. Can't we have old Pop Cooper again some time? Maybe because my own face is a bit wrinkled and what is left of my hair is a Santa Claus shade, I like those creaking old heroes. Let others have the Robert Taylors. I'll take the Pop Coopers every time. They know their stuff.—Hal K. Hornick, Charleston, S. C.

Thanks, pal. On the whole, what you liked outweighed what you didn't like and I'm sure author Armstrong Livingston will be glad to see your letter. We rather like those old codger heroes, ourselves. Thanks for your kind letter. Comes now a bit of a bouquet from a lady fan "down Maine."

I am glad to see you are giving the ladies a break in one of your stories. Even though one of them turns out to be a killer, your story "DEATH ON THE METER" shows us that even lady taxidrivers can put their shoulders to the wheel when it comes time to do essential war work. Driving a taxi isn't an easy job, especially in fair-sized cities. Mr. Edward Ronns, who wrote that story, seems to know what he is talking about. I liked that story a whole lot. Can't we have more about the ladies doing war work?

—Adele Fitzgibbon, Bangor, Me.

Thank you, ma'am. Also, thanks to the many other men and women who have written in. Wish we had room for more excerpts from your letters.

Everybody—keep your letters and postcards heading this way. Please address them to The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y.

Happy reading to everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

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\*Source: "American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times," by Douglas Gilbert (published by Whittlesey House); I. C. S. records.

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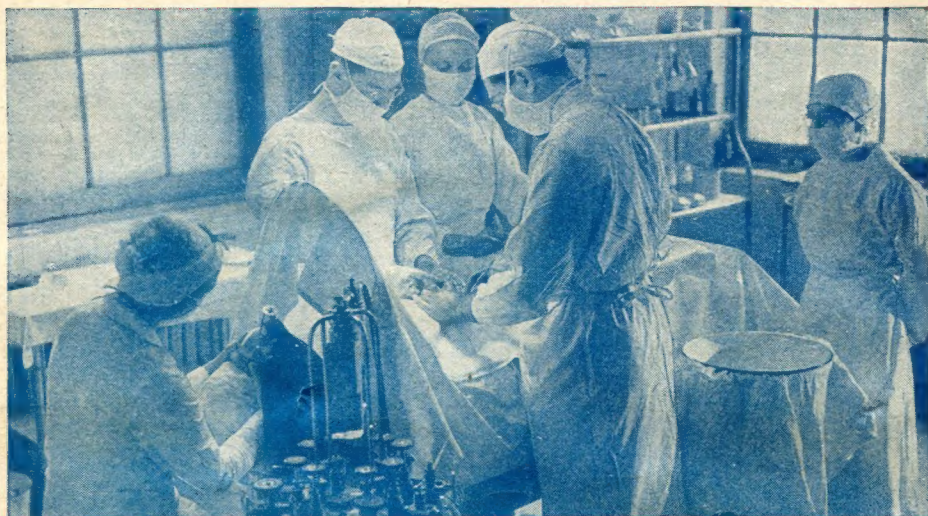
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